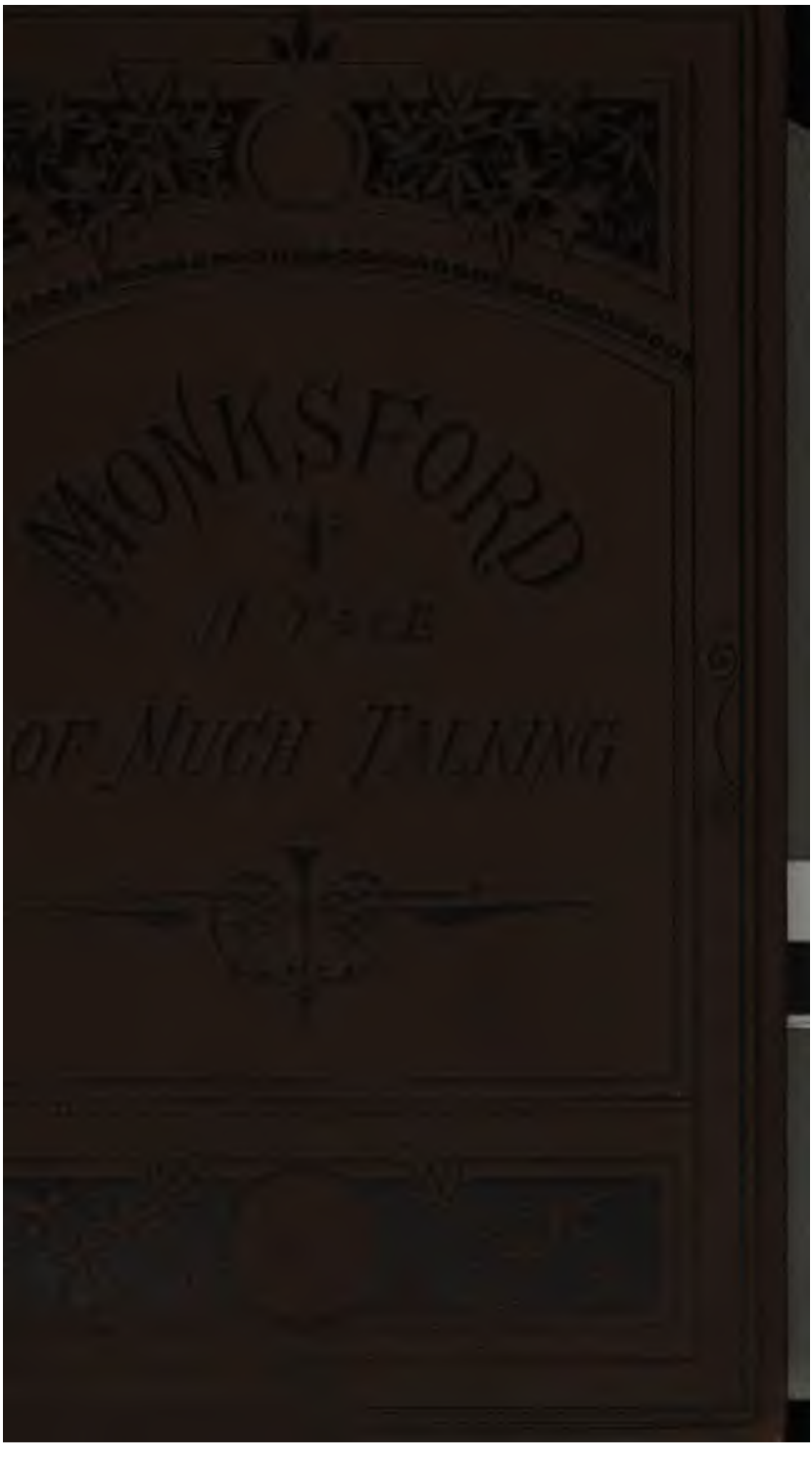
NONKSFORD
A PLACE
OF MUCH TALKING

MONKSFORD

A TALE OF MUCH TALKING

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"WISE AS A SERPENT," "WIFE OR SLAVE," ETC.

"Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment;
And a babbler is no better."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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SEVERELY VIRTUOUS STRICTURES.

IT had been a most charming meeting. Every one repeated the phrase as the concourse dispersed, until the larger number, probably, really came to regard it as in some way especially attractive. The Monksford race meeting was a very small event in the sporting world, so this was the first occasion upon which it had ever been honoured by the presence of royalty, which presence, of course, infused a sort of subtle charm into the whole proceedings.

But—Ah, there were a great many "buts"—save in the case of a few such blunt assertors of hard facts as Kate Tollmache, who plainly said it was only a little less dull and tedious than usual. The Duke and Duchess bore up manfully under the burden of their royal incubus, but—neuralgic

pain and the princely English rendered it a sore struggle.

Mr. Mostyn had hedged carefully enough to prevent Cleopatra's disaster telling very heavily upon him; but she had proved herself to be terribly easily shaken, and had, moreover, quite apart from her accident, distinctly shown temper when called upon, in a manner not pleasant to contemplate, with a view to future performances. Colonel Twyford, more than ever piqued at Kate Tollmache's cool indifference, had shown, for him, great attention to her cousin Gertrude, and Lady Clanraven had almost begun to regard her niece's conduct towards him as a really providential circumstance; but—What could she do? She could not ask him to come to Wycherley Court, after Kate had flatly refused an introduction to him, so a great chance was likely to be entirely thrown away. Thus it was in almost every case. Some drops of poison lurked in every chalice, the taste thereof rendered more bitter because each one, as he strove to gulp it down with a smiling countenance, would indulge in an infatuated belief that the smiles of his neighbours were more genuine than his own; that the poison drop was for him alone, and that everyone else's cup was as sweet as the smile with which it was quaffed.

The Olympian "buts" were numerous and various. The inferior creation had fewer, and were more outspoken over them; and it is not too much to say that the most unpalatable "but," of the whole day, to far the larger number of them, was Rose Playfair. Poor Rose! her complexion, hair, and eyes had

brought her into much ill repute, when she had been only the doctor's daughter, and had walked about Monksford in a print frock, and well-worn hat; her acquaintance with Miss Tollmache had sunk her lower still, and now, her present position and future prospects united, had brought her to the lowest possible depths in public estimation. Not for a moment had Mr. Wycherley's proceedings escaped the searching glance of severe morality, and her name was on more tongues than she for a moment dreamed, during the remainder of that day. Mr. Wycherley was a handsome, dissipated man, holding a social position much superior to hers. He had openly manifested admiration for her on more than one occasion. What was the proper and natural outcome of such facts? Of course, to run down and cast as many stones as could conveniently be laid hands upon at—not *him*, but *her*. They were hard at work before some of them, at least, were a hundred yards from the course.

"That Rose Playfair's a downright bold, designing girl!" Mrs. Moss exclaimed, in an outburst of rampant morality, tinged with maternal exultation, as she surveyed her own two frigid, proper-looking daughters opposite to her, who had never in their lives been guilty of looking pretty enough to attract bold admiration, and whose only shortcomings were the respectable ones of spiteful tattling and backbiting. "I wonder whatever her mother can be thinking of? I'm sure it would break my heart if I thought a daughter of mine could go on in such a way. Tricked out like an actress, and sitting up

there just for nothing but to be looked at, as bold as anything."

"That is not the worst of it," replied Miss Witham, who made the fourth in the carriage. "If it were mere general vanity I could look it over, as only natural in a rather pretty, underbred girl. But I fear there is a special design in this case. It is very very sad."

She sighed heavily, and looked very grave, having hurled her stone with a certain dignified reticence, in order to mark the fact that it was one of a superior order to those in company with which it travelled. Miss Witham's whole attitude on the race day was that of condescension. She always accepted a seat beside Mrs. Moss, in the comfortable carriage which Mr. Moss yearly chartered for the day, and a share in the excellent luncheon which Mrs. Moss took care to provide; and the Mosses were glad to have her, for they were still, and, Mrs. Moss at least felt, would continue, so long as they lived over that horrid shop, in a position to render the society of distinctly professional people a matter of importance. But Miss Witham always felt that, as the daughter of a captain, and the cousin of an admiral, she derogated in thus accepting solid and somewhat expensive enjoyment in the companionship of trade; so she was always a shade stately on these occasions, and slightly reserved, even in the matter of backbiting. She did not discuss the sins and follies of Rose Playfair with Mrs. Moss in the same spirit of friendly open-hearted confidence in which she would have slandered some common London acquaintance with her friends in Bryanston Square.

Mrs. Moss also sighed, executed a small series of pantomimic gestures, calculated to imply that she quite understood Miss Witham, and appreciated her reticence in the presence of her own innocent lambs, and replied that it was to be hoped, for the poor girl's sake, they would not hold off that marriage much longer; though in her heart she believed the Huddlestones were doing all they could to stave it off, because they were not satisfied; and if Mrs. Huddlestone had any eyes, she should think she must have seen enough that day to make her much less satisfied than she had ever been.

Mrs. Collier was busy with the same subject; but she, as was her wont, approached it from the opposite side, and mingled condolences over the present with dismal prognostications for the future on behalf of George Huddlestone. His preference for Rose Playfair had showed itself too early to allow her to indulge in dreams respecting her own daughter, who was a year younger than Rose. Still, there was her sweet-tempered, modest, thoroughly domestic Fanny expanding into a most charming young woman, and Mrs. Collier always regarded and spoke of George Huddlestone with a sort of half disdainful commiseration.

There was always a great deal of what is usually termed social intercourse in Monksford on the day after the races. Those who did not care, or could not afford to go, thus learned what the Duchess and the Ladies Fane had worn, and what gentlemen were with them, and whether the Misses Jarvis looked more or less faded, and if there were any signs to be interpreted into a chance of either of

them "going off." There were also those whose religious scruples held them back on principle from places of such doubtful character as race courses, and who could thus reap some of the pleasant results of the sins of their neighbours, while leaving to them the whole burden of the possible evils involved; so altogether there was always much running to and fro on the day following the races.

Of course, facts, fictions, and comments respecting Rose Playfair and Mr. Wycherley formed no unimportant part of the budget on the present occasion; especially at a sort of social gathering which always took place at Mrs. Collier's on the following afternoon.

"Do you mean to say," asked Mrs. Tatnell, "that she actually made some sign to him from the stand?"

"I cannot say I saw it myself," replied Miss Witham; "you know I am rather short-sighted. But I believe Miss Moss distinctly saw some sort of signal pass between them."

"You don't mean it? I never heard of anything so disgraceful!"

"Pardon me, Mrs. Tatnell," interposed Mr. Smithson, who had dropped in on the way home from some professional visits; "but there is nothing disgraceful in the matter at all. I fear Miss Moss is rather too ready with evil constructions. Miss Playfair merely bowed slightly, and Mr. Wycherley raised his hat."

"And what can that mean?" retorted Miss Witham. "How can she possibly have any acquaintance with Mr. Wycherley?"

"Any that she *ought* to have," murmured Mrs. Tatnell, in a low tone.

"That I am not in a position to explain," replied Mr. Smithson. But I simply say that when a young lady in company with the gentleman to whom she is engaged, and under the charge of his mother, openly bows to a gentleman, and he returns the salute, it is at least presumable there is nothing in the acquaintance of which she is ashamed.

Here Mrs. Collier dashed in. Rose was being too well defended. "That's all very well, Mr. Smithson; and no one would have thought anything of that, if it had not been for what happened afterwards. Perhaps you did not see, but I did, that the moment Mr. George Huddlestone went away, Mr. Wycherley came back, and stood for some time just opposite to where she sat."

"Never!" exclaimed Mrs. Tatnell.

"A fact, I assure you. Perhaps, however, Mr. Smithson can explain away that also."

"There is nothing to explain. I saw the whole thing. But there was nothing on Miss Playfair's part to which the most captious could have taken exception, and she is certainly not responsible for what Mr. Whycherley may choose to do; unless," he added, with a sly smile, "you can make her out personally responsible for being so extremely attractive. I for one was not the least surprised at Mr. Wycherley's conduct, although, I confess, I thought he trod very close on impertinence."

It is hardly necessary to say that Mr. Smithson had done Rose Playfair's cause small service by his championship. Quite a little angry chorus of decla-

ration that her good looks were greatly exaggerated arose on all sides, in the midst of which he made his escape.

Mr. Smithson did not, however, take his way home. There was a footpath along the bank of the river, shaded for some distance by fine old trees. It was a quiet, pleasant walk on a sunny afternoon, and thither he bent his steps, walking slowly, and now and again stopping to stand and gaze thoughtfully into the river, with a face as grave, and nearly as anxious as when he was running the gauntlet of the rival thrusts of Messrs. Moss and Buller.

On and on he went, past the shadowing limes—past the gardens of one or two outlying houses, which had been built for themselves by prosperous natives of Monksford, and on to where the river lost all look of the artificial life of a town, and became a genuine product of nature, winding slowly along through rich meadow land, between banks thickly fringed with tall waving rushes, which bowed their heads, and rustled softly as the summer breeze swept gently through them. Still his face was grave and perplexed; his meditations seemed to have had no effect in clearing up whatever doubts or difficulties were disturbing his repose.

Suddenly looking up at last, he saw the rector coming along the path towards him, and his clouded face brightened.

"The very man," he murmured to himself, as he advanced to meet him.

"What, sauntering idly here at this time of day, Smithson?" Mr. Lawrence said. "I'm afraid that does not look as if work was very heavy."

"Work does not often come in oppressive quantities to me," Mr. Smithson answered, with a smile. "Still, things are certainly better than they were; and really, at this moment, it was not mere idleness which brought me here, but the desire for a little undisturbed reflection."

"Good-bye, then; I will go."

"By no means. You are the very man I most wished to meet. I was thinking of you at the moment when you came in sight."

"Turn and walk with me then," the rector said, "for I must make for the town, although I am not specially hurried."

They walked on together, but for a few moments Mr. Smithson did not speak.

"What is it, my friend?" Mr. Lawrence asked kindly. "If I can be of any service to you, speak freely."

"Not to me, thank you. It was over no perplexity personally concerning myself that I was meditating. But I fear," he added with a faint smile, "one of your lambs is in danger."

"Who?—and how?"

"The Playfair's pretty daughter, Rose."

"She in danger? How can that be? She is to be married next year to George Huddlestone, the best fellow in the neighbourhood. That does not look like danger."

"Nevertheless I fear she is in danger, and in a danger difficult to avert. She has attracted the attention of that dissipated Frenchman, and small wonder. She is marvellously pretty." And Mr. Smithson heaved a sigh.

"What, Wycherley? But there is no acquaintance between them?"

"There you are mistaken. There is some acquaintance between them, not clandestine either, for she bowed openly to him when he passed the stand yesterday."

"Ha!" Mr. Lawrence exclaimed, suddenly recalling to mind the ride on the common. "But how on earth can it have come about?"

"That I cannot conceive; but that is not the worst of it. He openly manifested marked admiration for her, and just as she was leaving the course his groom covertly gave her a small note."

"Are you quite certain?" asked the rector, incredulously.

"Only too certain. I was looking for Mrs. Daniels' carriage for her, and was close by at the moment, though she did not see me. I saw the whole transaction quite distinctly. I was close enough to see the Wycherley griffin on the fellow's buttons, otherwise I should not have known it was Wycherley's servant. Does not that look like danger?"

"Only too much. How did she take it?"

"I am sure," replied Mr. Smithson warmly, "she is not to blame. There was nothing in her demeanour in the stand that anyone could have taken exception to, and when she got the note, her first expression was one of unbounded astonishment. She looked after the man, and then at the note, with quite a bewildered look. Then she coloured very violently, and at that moment the carriage came up, and I saw no more. But I would stake anything upon it she is not to blame."

The rector walked on in silence. "Why not speak to her mother?" he said at last.

Mr. Smithson shook his head. "You don't know the Playfairs as well as I do. He and I are excellent friends, in spite of a little professional clawing and snatching, so I see a good deal of them. The mother is a well-meaning woman, but a great fool. She has brought up those girls wretchedly, filled them with all sorts of absurd ideas about the value of their pretty faces. Rose is a sweet, amiable girl, but she has suffered from her training. The mother is quite silly enough, if she got scent of this, to try and encourage the acquaintance. If she thought Rose could catch Wycherley, she would make her throw Huddlestone over in a moment."

"Does she not care for him then?"

"After a fashion, but her mother would soon talk her round. And Wycherley, you must allow, is really a splendid-looking fellow. It's but natural a young, inexperienced girl like Rose should be flattered by his admiration, which was perfectly apparent. Those women," and he made a significant gesture in the direction of the town, "are at her, teeth and claws, already; they cannot forgive her for being so pretty. Fortunately none of them detected the episode of the note; they were all too much occupied with their trains and frillings, in the crush getting out of the stand. I was terribly afraid some of them might have spied it out, so I looked in at Mrs. Collier's this afternoon, just to hear what was being said. None of them have any idea of it. You see the perplexity I am in? I cannot

see how to act, without the risk of doing more harm than good. Yet I feel the poor child is in danger, and if any evil should come to her I should never forgive myself for having let this thing pass. What can I do?"

"That is anything but an easy question to answer, my friend."

"Might you not speak to her?"

"Easily; but the chances are I should do more harm than good. The fact is, we know too much and too little. It does not do to handle fragile objects of uncertain form in semi-darkness. The mother is the great stumbling-block."

"And yet it seems such a cowardly thing to leave her to such a risk."

"No, we must not do that. Stay—" and the rector paused a moment. Then a light broke over his anxious face. "I have it. We will entrust the matter to more skilful hands than ours."

"Whose do you mean?"

"Miss Tollmache."

"Indeed! Is she a likely person to interfere wisely?"

Mr. Lawrence drew a deep breath. Not a sigh, rather one of those deep inspirations which suggest sudden relief from pain or perplexity.

"The most likely person I know," he said quietly. "She is a noble woman."

"Really? I thought she had the character of being a haughty, rather imperious person, expecting everyone and everything to give way to her."

"Very possibly. The majority of people look at others through coloured glasses, and imagine the

tint to belong to them, not to the glass. Miss Tollmache is a woman rather to be worshipped by a few than to be popular with the many."

Mr. Smithson was an excellent man in his way, but not remarkably gifted with tact.

"And by yourself among the number?" he asked, laughing. "Ah, Lawrence, we shall hear ere long that the impregnable rector has struck his colours at last. And then poor Ned Corbett will have some chance with Mrs. Campbell."

A slight shadow came over the rector's face.

"You forget," he said, "that Miss Tollmache holds a social position very different from my own. In one sense I am certainly among the number of her worshippers, but I should be most presumptuous to dream of being so in the sense you imply."

"Oh, don't be faint-hearted, my friend. You parsons have wondrous luck in these matters sometimes. And social differences are not always unsurmountable."

"It would ill become me even to picture such a difference as surmountable," Mr. Lawrence answered, a shade coldly. "However, to return to our subject, I will consult Miss Tollmache about this matter. She takes a great interest in the poor little girl, and is just the person to make the best possible use of the information."

They parted at the bridge which crossed the river at the bottom of the High Street. Before Mr. Lawrence reached the rectory he had heard two editions of the enormities of poor little Rose Playfair, and Miss Bradley had a third ready for him, so he was very well informed of all that could be laid

to her charge before he sought the aid of Kate Tollmache on her behalf.

They were fast friends, Kate Tollmache and the rector. The position was new to both. She had been well used to be courted, petted, surfeited with attentions; but then all had been not for herself, the individual woman, but for the handsome, well-born heiress. And none knew better than herself that the very same adulation would have been just as freely lavished on any possible phase of womanhood, good, bad, or indifferent, possessed of her advantages. This consciousness had not inclined her to accord a very gracious reception to any of her admirers, and had come by degrees to tinge her general manner with a certain shade of half-defiant coldness, which had probably tended to keep at a distance more worthy adoration, always apt to be jealously susceptible where self-interested motives are plainly possible. Now she found herself in the presence of a wholly new phase of feeling, and she expanded under its influence in a manner which made her whole bearing towards the rector very different from her ordinary demeanour.

Lionel Lawrence had divined, by a species of intuition, all her noblest characteristics, and his adoration was paid rather at the shrine of the ideal woman than at that of the individual person. Her rank and wealth seemed to place her on a level so far above his own, that, as he had said to Smithson, he would have considered it gross presumption to dream of any more distinctly personal feeling. Nevertheless, she was rapidly becoming the centre round which his whole existence revolved, without

his ever asking himself where it would end? or distinctly picturing to himself what a blank life would seem to him now, without occasional companionship with her.

He found her alone the following morning. "You look very grave," she said, laughing as she greeted him. "Are you come to administer a pastoral rebuke for my worldliness in going to the races?"

"Hardly; as I never remonstrated beforehand."

"Ah, but just think how much more interesting and sensational it is to appear in the form of the valiant and combat-stained shepherd, bearing home a much-bedraggled lamb, wrenched in fierce conflict out of the very jaws of the wolf, than in the guise of the careful watcher over a closely guarded fold. You will never have a revival in your parish on that principle."

"I would rather prevent one being required, and risk the loss of a sensation. But I fear," he added, with a grave smile, carrying on the train of ideas her playful words had suggested, "that there is some danger of a sensation on behalf of one of the lambs of the flock, at the present moment."

"Ah! How is that?"

"Tell me what you know of Mr. Wycherley?"

She replied, with a merry laugh, "Is he the lamb in question? I should think it was the first time in his life he had ever figured in that character. In long petticoats I can only picture him as an infant wolf, harmless alone from infantile incapacity for evil."

"I fear he is trying to act the wolf now. That is the cause of my visit to you, and my reason for

asking what you know about him. I know you look upon him as a fortune hunter."

"I know him for worse than that. He is a dissipated, unprincipled man, a confirmed gambler, and one of the leading spirits of a most reckless set in Paris."

"Do you know that he has contrived in some way to make acquaintance with your little friend Rose Playfair?"

"Is it possible? Oh, I hope you are mistaken!"

"Unfortunately I am not."

"But how can it have come about? She knows no one who can have introduced him."

"I cannot tell how it has come about. I can only speak to the fact." And then he told her all he had heard the previous day. Kate Tollmache listened with evident uneasiness and alarm.

"My poor little Rose! It is a most dangerous acquaintance for her. With her pretty, innocent child-like face, she is just the girl to attract a man of his stamp, and she is quite silly enough to feel immensely flattered at the thought of being admired by one in a position so much above her own. But what can one do? '

"That is the very question I came to ask you. I do not know anything much more difficult than to interfere judiciously in such a case."

"What is her mother like?"

Mr. Lawrence shook his head. "The very question I asked Smithson, who knows her better than I do. I believe she is a well-meaning woman, but she has a heap of children, and small chance of any provision for them. She looks upon marriage as her daughters' only escape from the wretched drudgery of half-

educated nursery governesses, I imagine, and therefore regards their beauty as so much stock-in-trade. Smithson evidently thinks she would be much elated, if she found out that Wycherley admired her daughter, and would try to cultivate an acquaintance, and make her throw over Huddlestone, if she thought Wycherley could be caught."

"Infatuated woman! Why do such women have daughters to take care of? But, Mr. Lawrence, how is it that neither of us seem to regard Rose's engagement to Mr. Huddlestone as any safeguard?"

"Simply because we both feel it to be none, and are bad actors," he bluntly replied. "Yes, it is even so. George Huddlestone has made a mistake. There can be no doubt of that."

"Poor George."

"Ah, you have noticed that? So have I. I fear he is poor George in a sense which she never dreams of. He has given her as true, honest, manly a love as ever man gave to woman, and has received in return a sort of semi-affectionate toleration, in consideration of his excellent qualities and large fortune, which may be held as sufficient counterbalance for his want of all those external attractions which are conspicuous in Mr. Wycherley."

"I fear you are right. I noticed her half-apologetic tone respecting him the first time I ever heard her speak of him. Good heavens!" and she clenched her small, nervous hands, "it makes me almost furious to think that women can be so infatuated! Why, if she took such an honest, manly, true-hearted fellow as that, with nothing in the world belonging to him beyond the clothes he stood in, her chances of happi-

ness would be infinitely beyond those of the woman who should take Mr. Wycherley, with all the wealth of Crœsus, and that is very far from what any woman will get with him. It is in reality a good man, with a good fortune, in one scale, and a bad man, loaded with gambling debts, in the other. Oh, Mr. Lawrence, I fear we are worse than windbags!"

He had been looking at her with strangely wistful eyes, but as, with the last sentence, she turned her glance upon him, he answered, with a quiet smile,—

"You forget that she sees one man as he is, the other in a gorgeous haze of her own producing, or of the producing of the ideas inculcated into her from childhood. But we seem no nearer to a decision as to what is to be done than at the first."

Kate Tollmache thought for a little while.

"I see but one course," she said. "I will ask her, on the first opportunity, how she became acquainted with Mr. Wycherley. As she openly bowed to him, the question will seem natural enough, and then I will give her a strong warning against him. I think that is the utmost which can be done. And after all, I hope there is no danger for her beyond a little mortification, which may do her good. It only wants about ten days to the county ball. That must, I think, be the limit of Mr. Wycherley's stay in the neighbourhood. He can hardly strain Lady Jarvis's hospitality much further. In fact," she added, with a slight curl of her lips "I very much doubt his feeling any disposition to do so."

She said no more, but the rector was better informed than she supposed. With a slight flash of amusement passing over his face, he replied,—

"I met Mr. Tollmache in the park. He tells me you are going to Wales for a short time, as soon as the ball is over."

She coloured a little at his evident divination of her meaning, but only said,—

"Yes; we have unearthed a really quiet little place there, where there is temporary peace for the weary, and good sea fishing, of which my father is rather fond."

"Mr. Tollmache asked me to accompany you."

"Really?" She was on her guard in a moment. "I am sure your society would be a pleasure to my father. I hope you will be able to come."

"I proposed to Mr. Tollmache to join him for a short time towards the end of your stay. I could not well be long absent just now. When I was a wild little urchin, playing about the Yorkshire coast, I used to do a good deal of sea fishing. I was often out in the boats. I am very fond of it still. In the meantime, you will try what you can do for this poor little butterfly, will you not?"

"I will, indeed—but—"

"But what?"

"I fear I place more reliance on the wolf departing to more profitable hunting grounds, than on the discretion of the lamb."

"And rightly, I am afraid," he answered, as he wished her good-bye.

CHAPTER XVI.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

ROSE PLAYFAIR drove away from the race-course in such a turmoil of excited feeling that she could hardly answer coherently to one or two remarks addressed to her during the drive home. A mysterious note slipped into her hand, unobserved, by an unknown messenger! It was an adventure—one worthy of a heroine of romance! She felt herself suddenly expand into a personage of no ordinary importance, transported into realms far beyond the ken of ordinary damsels of the age, and weighted with thoughts and responsibilities of which they knew nothing. The carriage passed the Colliers at the moment, and she saluted Fanny Collier with an air of grave and gracious condescension, which not a little inflamed the wrath of that young lady, who had already pronounced that Rose Playfair's airs on the strength of her engagement were absolutely past all endurance.

Rose had not, like Mr. Smithson, recognised the Wycherley griffin; but she had instantly divined

whence the note came, and through all her excitement there mingled, at first, a half-guilty feeling, which became almost remorseful more than once, when George, turning round from the box, smiled down upon her his bright loving smile, and asked some question concerning her comfort. But by degrees, as they drove towards the town, she began to calm down, and to be able to indulge in very sage reflections. In the first place, the receipt of the note was no fault of hers. It was thrust into her hand and left there, without her having any option of refusal, and the man was gone before a suspicion crossed her mind as to whence it came. She could not throw it down; clearly, therefore, the only thing to do was to pocket it. In the second place, she did not yet know what was in it. It might be wholly unimportant. Were it not so, she should, of course, be guided by the nature of its contents. Were they in any way derogatory to her position, or such as to be in the least likely to compromise her in any way, she would certainly take decided steps at once to assert her own dignity in the most emphatic manner, probably place the matter instantly in George's hands. And having arrived at this lofty resolution, she reached home in a very consequential and magnificent frame of mind, which inclined her to assume a slightly patronising air towards the whole house, and a very domineering tone with the children.

Alice insisted on going up to her room with her, to help her to doff all her splendours; and almost before she was ready, Edith was calling out from the stairs that tea was waiting, so there was no chance to see what the mysterious note contained, until she

could slip away afterwards, on the pretence of looking for some work. Then, with a beating heart, she untwisted the little slip. Inside was written in French with a pencil, "May I beg for five minutes to-morrow evening? I will pass along the lane about eight o'clock. Pardon the liberty, but I think you can give me some important information, which I am anxious to obtain.—VICTOR WYCHERLEY."

Mr. Wycherley's French, if spoken, would probably not have been very intelligible to Rose Playfair; but she could read it easily enough, and she read the note more than once, with very mingled feelings. She was not a wise little damsel, but want of wisdom, and too much consciousness of possessing a very pretty face, were the worst faults which could be laid to her account; and she was too entirely unversed in such affairs as that now in hand to read between the lines of the note she had received. She accepted its simple outward meaning, with some little surprise certainly, but without the least suspicion. She was therefore half relieved, half disappointed. It would certainly have been vexatious to have been obliged by dignity to throw over and denounce Mr. Wycherley at once, but, at the same time, it was a little mortifying to find such a promising romance dwindle suddenly into a prosaic request for some information. What possible information could he want from her? Of course she would stroll round the paddock the following evening, and hear what he wanted. She put aside the note with a sigh, and went down stairs with her work.

George came the next day to ask her to go with him and look at the house which was being built for

them. He was in high spirits. The weather was keeping fine and dry, so the building was going on rapidly, and he could already show her what a pretty drawing-room she would have, with a large bow window commanding a fine view; and what a charming little room there would be beyond it, which was to be her own special boudoir, and over the fitting-up of which he was already expending much thought and consideration in anticipation. Then he told her that they were getting on so well with the house that it would certainly be ready by next summer, and that they might therefore be married in the spring, and when they returned from their wedding tour they were to go to The Hall for a few months, while they superintended the furnishing of the house to suit their own taste. And Rose was full of delight and affection, and thought George was the dearest fellow in the world, and hoped, after they were married, he would relent about Mr. Wycherley.

She spent a longer time than usual that afternoon in getting ready for tea; and when she came down stairs, her twelve-year-old sister, Lucy, gave Alice a nudge, and said in a very audible whisper, "Rose thinks George is coming to-night. Look how she has done her hair!" And Rose grew very red and angry, sharply telling her sister she wished she would hold her tongue, and not make disagreeable remarks.

"My dear Rose, don't be so sharp with the child," remonstrated her mother; "I'm sure it was a very natural thought."

"I hate to be made remarks upon, mamma, and it's all nonsense. George is gone out to dinner to-night.

And it's very unpleasant not to be able even to do one's hair in a different way without a silly chatter being made over it."

"Rose is very cross," put in little Edith. "I like Alice best; she doesn't scold me."

Rose sat down to her tea in sullen silence, and took herself off to the garden, with a book, the moment it was over. She did not, however, make much progress with her reading. Her eyes ran over the lines, but her ears were listening for the chiming of the church clock, and her thoughts were far away. At last she heard the clock chime a quarter to eight, and then she fairly laid aside the volume, and drew a deep breath, beginning to feel a little nervous, and to wonder if Mr. Wycherley would really come?

She walked slowly through the shrubbery; and down the paddock, and stood for a moment by the hedge, listening for the sound of horse hoofs; but she heard nothing, save the distant hum of life from the town. It was a still, grey evening, and falling dusk. She sauntered along by the hedge, the length of the paddock, paused to listen a moment, and then turned again. Half-way back, she fancied she caught the sound of a horse's tread, and turned.

How provoking! there was some one coming along the lane; and surely she heard a horse in the distance. The foot-passenger would certainly be some one who knew her, and if Mr. Wycherley should come just at that moment—who could possibly be in the lane at that hour? She began to feel really frightened, and almost made up her mind to go back at once to the house. Before she

reached the end of the paddock, however, the footsteps were close to her, and then a voice said softly,—

"Miss Playfair—how very kind!"

Rose started violently. It had never occurred to her that Mr. Wycherley might come on foot.

"I beg your pardon," he continued, in a most grave and deferential tone. "I fear I startled you. But it is most kind of you to grant my request. I have really been on thorns, I assure you, ever since I sent that little note."

"Why?"

"I feared you might think it very impertinent. I am but half an Englishman, you know, Miss Playfair, and I often find myself offending the proprieties of English people most terribly, quite unintentionally. I am afraid I am very impulsive, and often do foolish things. It was just a sudden impulse made me write the note."

"I cannot think what information you can possibly want that I am likely to be able to give you," Rose said, feeling quite reassured, if just a shade disappointed at his quiet matter-of-fact tone.

"Well, I want some information which I can hardly ask for in an open, unconcealed way, because it concerns some one's character, and it does not do to go about asking questions about anyone's character, unless you wish to damage it. We are not too charitable in this world, and if one dares to ask if Jones is a man who may be trusted, the individual asked instantly assumes that one has some reason to believe the contrary. Lucky if he does not tell the next friend he meets that he has

grave reason to believe that there is something seriously wrong with Jones's character."

"Surely everyone is not so bad," Rose responded; "though I know people do say most ill-natured things."

"No. But then being so total a stranger here, where even my own house knows me not, I do not know who may, or who may not, be trusted. I am very sure, however, that you would be neither ill-natured nor incautious, so trusting to your goodness to forgive my taking such a liberty, I venture to apply to you. You are doubtless acquainted with Mr. Octavius Buller, an architect, living in Monksford?"

"Oh, yes. I know him quite well."

"Then I would venture to ask you that all-important question, beseeching you not for a moment to suppose any sinister misgivings lurk in the background, but rather to believe the truth, that pure ignorance prompts the question,—Is he to be trusted?"

Rose hesitated. "I don't quite understand in what way you mean!"

"Well, I don't of course mean, is he a man one would not like to meet in a lonely lane unless one had one's revolver at hand, but in the way of business? The fact is, I think it quite possible I might find it convenient to make some use of him in matters of business. Can I trust to him?"

"Oh, I am sure Mr. Buller is a most respectable man. He has been established in Monksford for a great many years, and I have heard papa say he has a very good business."

"Thanks, a thousand times. I felt sure you would be able to tell me, and I really did not know whom to ask. And you really do not think me very impertinent for having ventured to make such a request from you?"

"Certainly not," Rose replied, moved to much graciousness of demeanour, by the almost humble deference of his tone and manner, and feeling quite anxious to reassure him, he seemed so greatly to fear he might have given her offence. "I am very glad if I have been able to help you in any way."

"Thanks, thanks very much. You are most kind. Your answer quite satisfies me. And now, may I venture to express a hope that you enjoyed the day yesterday?"

"Indeed I did, very much. It was a charming day. Did you not think so?"

"As far as weather went, certainly. It could not have been a better day. I cannot say much for the rest of it. At least as far as I was concerned."

"Oh, it was the best gathering that has been for some years. I thought it most charming!"

"So I have no doubt should I, had I been beside you. Tedium reigned over the other division of the stand; and outside it was hot and dusty."

"You don't appreciate your advantages, Mr. Wycherley. Everyone on our side was envying the Duke's party."

"Then, Miss Playfair, it is a pity you could not have been transplanted, that you might have learned a lesson of contentment. You would soon have wished yourself away again. His Serene Highness is

the greatest bore I know, and everyone else was either tiresome or cross. And Lady Jarvis's party, to which I, of course, specially belonged, was the most insufferable of all."

"Miss Clarissa Jarvis is considered the beauty of this neighbourhood," Rose replied, with a touch of malice.

"Say, 'was,' Miss Playfair; and then, having firm confidence in your veracity, I can only marvel at the taste of the neighbourhood."

"Ah, you mean before Miss Tollmache came."

"No, I do not. Miss Tollmache is handsome, certainly. But she is a person whose title to beauty one is forced to admit, rather because a critical survey compels one to allow the claim, than from any spontaneous sentiment of admiration. I was not, however, referring to her. I cannot conceive in what the beauty of the pale-haired, pale-eyed Clarissa can have consisted, even when she had a complexion. She appears to me now to have faded into one universal tint of indefinite drab."

Rose laughed merrily. She was not of that class of women in whom detraction of other women raises at once a sentiment of contemptuous suspicion—which class it is to be feared are less numerous than might be desired.

"Perhaps you do not admire fair people?" she said, with a little touch of coquetry.

"On the contrary, I admire fair beauty beyond any other. The fair type of English beauty is my ideal."

There was still light enough for his glance to give point to his reply, and Rose looked down with a conscious little smile, and a slight increase of

colour, which was very becoming. "Miss Tollmache is my ideal of a handsome woman," she said.

"Ah, you are friends. Women's opinions are always coloured by their feelings. No woman is ever a fair pledge of another woman's looks."

"We are always said to be too jealous of each other."

"Pshaw! One of those common-place sayings, the falsehood of which none know better than those who most persistently repeat them. Some women are jealous, of course, but many are capable of most enthusiastic admiration for other women; only, as I said, it is an admiration founded more on personal feeling than on anything else. But I am keeping you standing here most thoughtlessly, Miss Playfair. I fear it is growing damp. Once more, thanks for your kindness. I hope we are to meet at the county ball?"

"Oh, no; I don't think I have a chance of going."

"Not to the ball? Why it will be worth a dozen of the races."

"I daresay; but I am afraid I have no chance of being at it. Papa and mamma never go, and I don't think any of our particular friends are going either."

"But you would like to be there?"

"Indeed I should."

"Ah, then I shall not give up the hope of seeing you. When young ladies wish a thing very much, I observe that they generally obtain it. You are fond of dancing."

"Very."

"I should think you would dance beautifully. How much I should like a waltz with you! I notice

that many English girls dance very well, but I hardly ever see an Englishman who can dance, especially waltz, creditably. I shall hope for a waltz with you at the ball, Miss Playfair."

"I am sure you will be disappointed."

"We shall see. I have a sort of presentiment that I shall not be disappointed. Remember, if you are there, the first waltz is mine. I may claim it, may I not?"

"Certainly."

"Thank you. Good night. I fear I have kept you out too long. I hope you will not catch cold."

"Rose, Rose! where are you?" Alice's voice was heard calling in the distance. "Mamma says you must come in. It is getting quite damp and cold."

Without another word, without waiting for any reply, Mr. Wycherley glided quietly away into the darkness. Rose, passing swiftly up the paddock, met Alice just emerging from the shrubs.

"Why, Rose, whatever have you been doing? It is getting quite dark. Mamma has been fussing ever so long because you did not come in."

"I was only walking round the paddock. It is a beautiful, warm night, not a bit damp. It is quite pleasant out in the open air."

She went in, however, with her sister, and sat down to work and reflect in silence; going over, in a sort of regular sequence, her conversation with Mr. Wycherley. What could he want with Mr. Buller? Could it be possible he intended to come and live at Wycherley Court, and was meditating alterations and improvements? She made a mental note of an intention to ask Miss Tollmache, on the

first convenient opportunity, for how long Mr. Tollmache had a lease of the place. Anxiety on her part to know how long the Tollmaches were likely to remain in the neighbourhood would seem natural enough. Then her thoughts dwelt with much satisfaction on Mr. Wycherley's opinions concerning Miss Jarvis, Miss Tollmache, and fair beauty. She could command a reflection of herself in the small glass at the back of the sideboard, from where she sat, and taking a furtive glance she caught a view of her own fair hair and bright complexion relieved against a dark-brown window curtain, and smiled a little well-pleased smile. There, at least, was no "indefinite tint of drab." She had known long since that she had the most thoroughly golden hair, and the brightest complexion of any girl in the neighbourhood, but the knowledge seemed to bring her a more than usual amount of satisfaction that night. But her smile changed to a sigh as she thought of the county ball. She had been at it once, two years since, as her introduction to the world, and it had been very charming; but she had never been at it again. There was a very narrow margin to the Playfair income for anything beyond necessaries, and ball tickets, with consequent outlay in finery, hardly came under that category. Of course she could not tell Mr. Wycherley the true reason why she was little likely to be at the ball; but it seemed a little hard this year. If she could only have managed the tickets, she could have contrived the dress. And a waltz with him! No doubt he waltzed beautifully; not like poor George, who certainly did not shine as a dancer. And how

jealous all the other girls about would be to see her waltzing with Mr. Wycherley! He was certainly very handsome, and quite a gentleman. Of one thing she felt quite convinced, both Miss Tollmache and George must be mistaken in having such a bad opinion of him. Why, if she had been a princess, he could not have treated her in a more courteous deferential way than he had done that evening. George might have heard every word that passed, and welcome. And his wish not to say a word which might be detrimental to Mr. Buller certainly showed that he was a kind-hearted, considerate man. He might have been a little dissipated, perhaps. Rose was not quite certain that men were not all the better for that, but he clearly could not be a bad man. And if they said anything more to her about him, she would tell them she was certain they were mistaken. Then her thoughts came back to the ball again, and she had arranged a most becoming dress for herself, and was, in imagination, whirling round the room, with Mr. Wycherley's arm round her, an object of envy or admiration to the whole assembly, when her mother, with a prolonged yawn, declared she was certain it must be past half-past nine, and told Alice to ring for the supper tray.

Mr. Wycherley, meanwhile, had walked back to the principal hotel in Monksford, where he had put up his horse, and dined, having, with many expressions of regret, declared himself to be compelled by important business to forego the pleasure of dining that day at Eaglescliff; to which assurance Lady Jarvis had responded, with affectionate cordiality, that it took away half the regret his absence

caused her, to see him making himself at home in the house, in such a friendly manner.

At the hotel he fully intended to remain until such time as would ensure his not arriving at Eagles-cliff till the ladies had either retired for the night, or were on the point of doing so, by which means he would escape, for one night at least, from what, in the free and easy language of his private meditations, he was wont to term the sickening contemplation of the flaccid smile of that confounded Clarissa, in her eternal pale-blue draperies.

He was in a state of considerable surprise, and no small amusement, as he strolled slowly through the town—an object of far more interest and attention than he at all suspected, being little versed in the ways of country towns.

"Of all the unsophisticated little beings," he muttered to himself, "I'll be hanged if she hasn't taken all that about Buller in sober earnest! I thought she was wider awake. The notion of one trysting a pretty girl to ask questions about the character of a vulgar brute of a house agent, or something of the sort! By Jove! it's too good to be true," and he laughed aloud at the bare thought. But what a pretty little thing she was—not very wise or very witty, evidently, but so artless and fresh. How charmingly she coloured, and how prettily conscious she was at the least compliment! How different it was from the affected artlessness, or assumed coyness, to which he was used; for the range of his acquaintance with feminine human nature included little beyond insipidity on the one hand, and syrenhood on the other. A fresh, pretty country

girl, innocent of arts and wiles, and guilty of only a little harmless vanity, with just coquetry enough about her to redeem her from tameness, was something as new as attractive to him—a discovery well worth following up. Verily, Mr. Buller had been very useful. She must be got to the county ball, that was clear. He would manage to see her again before then, some way or other, and clench that matter. Then, having reached the hotel, he ran up stairs to the billiard room, and engaged the marker to play a game, until such time as he considered it safe to set out on his return to Eagles-cliff.

One other person had left the race course on the previous afternoon feeling that the day had produced unexpected results, and that person was Mr. Octavius Buller. Providence, it is well known, helps those who help themselves—the class of dealings with which Providence may be supposed to interfere being discreetly left undefined. Mr. Buller, in his own estimation, had angled for a minnow, and caught, if not a whale, certainly something much larger than a minnow.

Nature had endowed him with an almost preternatural quickness in detecting and seizing upon small occurrences which might be turned to his own advantage. Hence the rapidity with which he had seen and seized upon the opportunity afforded to him of making acquaintance with Mr. Wycherley; but he had expected from the transaction no benefit beyond that of placing himself in a better position, with regard to future chances, than he occupied at the moment. The result had far surpassed his mild

expectations. He had done Mr. Wycherley, on his own showing, a great service; he had done himself a still greater one. He had not only staved off a chance of the young man becoming involved in serious difficulties sooner than would by any means suit his own purposes, but he had secured a piece of information most valuable in affording a clue for his guidance in the future.

This ray of sunshine came opportunely to cheer him under the depressing influence of the somewhat clouded state of his fortunes in other respects. Though he was determined to put a good face upon the matter, and fight it to the last, he had, in his own mind, little hope now of enjoying the rich satisfaction, not of securing the churchwardenship for himself, so much as preventing his rival from obtaining it. Moss had turned his flank by ratting in a way which he had not dreamed the "rascally Jew" to be capable of attempting, and would make good use of the chance he had secured of damaging his foe. There were voters who owed Moss money —there were voters who hated himself—there were weather-cock voters, who would always vote whichever way the wind blew strongest; but over and above all there was offered to every individual who could vote, or influence a vote, a splendid opportunity for the exhibition of a lofty tone of moral feeling, by hurling unmitigated condemnation at a detected sinner—an opportunity rarely neglected by the severely virtuous.

Mr. Buller did not so clearly recognise this latter element in the matter as he did the financial and weather-cock influence; but he fully expected defeat,

and he knew that heavy expenditure, in an unremunerative form, was hanging over him. So this gleam of a hope of something better in the future was doubly grateful, and he set himself at once to the consideration of how to make the best possible use of the chance which fate had thrown in his way. He was revolving this very subject the following evening, about seven o'clock, while taking a little survey from his bow window of the doings of the High Street, when he saw Mr. Wycherley ride past and turn into the inn yard. What could such a course of proceeding mean? There was nothing going on in the town. Why should Mr. Wycherley arrive at the hotel within half-an-hour of the ordinary county dinner hour? Every movement on his part had become a matter of deep interest to Mr. Buller, and he forthwith strolled down to the hotel.

Mr. Wycherley had ordered his horse to be put up, and dinner to be prepared for himself, and was reading the papers until it should be ready. Mr. Buller forthwith mounted to the billiard room, and indulged in a little private practice, and when Mr. Wycherley, towards eight o'clock, sauntered out with a cigar, Mr. Buller did the same, and happened, of course, to stroll in the same direction.

From a safe distance, he was witness to, though not an overhearer of, his interview with Rose Playfair, and very much he marvelled at the same. Nor did he only marvel. He noted the circumstance as one worthy of attentive consideration in connection with sundry thoughts which had been much in his mind since his short conversation with Mr. Wycher-

ley on the day of the races; and during protracted meditation that evening, Rose Playfair occupied a larger share of Mr. Buller's attention than she had ever done in her life before. Ere he went to bed that night, he resolved on a bold venture, and sitting down at once, he wrote a letter to Mr. Wycherley, which he determined to send without any delay.

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. BULLER'S PRIME SHERRY.

MR. OCTAVIUS BULLER'S carefully composed communication found Mr. Wycherley in a very undecided state of mind. Though he had not as yet become aware of the approaching departure of the Tollmaches, the mortifying consciousness that it was to very little purpose that he remained, was beginning to be unpleasantly clear to him. He had been many times at Wycherley Court, far oftener than Lady Jarvis in the least suspected; but only a few nights since he had dined there in company with her, Sir Myles, and Miss Jarvis. On this occasion he had been more than prudently demonstrative, and had been rebuffed in a manner which not the broadest margin for imaginative construction could allow to pass for the capricious coquetry of a spoiled heiress. His proceedings had, moreover, been a trifle too undisguised, and he was instantly made to feel that he had been guilty of a breach of the implied though unspoken contract. Lady Jarvis's grateful affection towards his departed grandmother appeared sud-

denly to have diminished in ardour, and he knew as well as if she had spoken the words that the date of his expulsion was fixed. Until after the county ball he remained a useful man; the moment it was over he would become a treacherous incubus—and then? He registered a resolution to be out of the house within twelve hours after that event. Whither he should then turn his steps, circumstances must determine. Meanwhile he could amuse his leisure by concocting schemes for getting that "pretty little wild flower," as he poetically termed Rose Playfair, to the ball.

Mr. Buller's letter ran as follows:—

"SIR,—When I had the happiness of being, as you were good enough to say, of service to you on the occasion of the races, you spoke of a mortgage on your property, bearing, you mentioned, a high rate of interest. You may perhaps recollect that I remarked at the time that a moderate rate of interest ought only to be charged on money advanced on such excellent security. I trust you will not consider my reverting to this subject an impertinence; but I happen at this moment to be seeking a good investment for a considerable sum, and should be happy, if agreeable to you, to take up the mortgage at a very moderate rate of interest. I shall feel honoured by your commands, should you feel disposed to enter into negotiations on this subject.—I have the honour to be, Sir, your very obedient servant, OCTAVIUS BULLER."

Mr. Wycherley sat thoughtfully twirling the end

of his moustache after the perusal of this letter. Business was hateful to him, but money certainly was not; and a hope of possible increase of income was sufficient to gild a large amount of business. The increase of revenues secured to him by the letting of Wycherley Court had been very grateful to him, and, like many other pleasures, its enjoyment had created a thirst for more. There were two mortgages on the Wycherley estate—one effected by his father, one by himself. Why should not Mr. Buller take them both up? If he did so at only a very moderate decrease of interest, the difference would create a very desirable addition to Mr. Wycherley's available cash. The proposition certainly merited consideration, especially now, when his hopes of securing a far more substantial increase of fortune were fast fading away. He therefore, after half-an-hour's pondering, wrote a few lines to say that he would call at Mr. Buller's office during the course of the following day, in order to confer with him on the subject of his letter.

Mr. Buller's breast swelled with triumph, and his heart beat high with hope, as he read Mr. Wycherley's note. Had the interest on his mortage been but two per cent., he would willingly have offered to accept one per cent. He strode homewards in such an exultant state of mind, that he even passed his rival's flaunting plate-glass windows without a bitter thought of his recent checkmate crossing his mind; and stationing himself at his dining-room window, gazed lovingly at the Wycherley timber, and strove to estimate its market value, putting, in his amateur innocence, a value upon magnificent

wide-spreading ornamental oaks and beeches, as against the tall, unadorned trunks of their less attractive brethren, which would have struck dismay into the heart of a timber merchant.

Then his wife came to him. The placid spirit of the meek little woman was positively stirred into something approaching excitement. She had been engaged that afternoon in the mild dissipation of paying visits, and it being Mrs. Daniels's afternoon, had found there a pleasant little social gathering, and had been instantly seized upon by Miss Witham with friendly warnings and suggestions. Mr. Buller should really take some steps to check or explain the reports which were being circulated in all directions, for they were most injurious, calculated seriously to injure his character, if they were allowed to spread uncontradicted.

"It's a downright shame, Octavius!" she said, her pale face absolutely slightly flushed, and her light eyes very nearly sparkling. "It's all those Mosses. Miss Witham didn't actually say so, but I could see quite well who it was, and it's all to prejudice people who they think might vote for you for church-warden. They're saying the wickedest things everywhere about the Parkers, how cruelly you've used them, and making out that the fever first began in your houses, and that it's all because you've never had the drains properly attended to. I'm sure I can't think how ever people can go and say such wicked things of their neighbours! And I should think if the Mosses heard all that some people say about them, they wouldn't like it. I'm sure I don't want to be ill-natured, but I really do think, some-

times, the things which come from them are not so good as they ought to be for the price."

A vision rose before Mr. Buller's eyes of the happy coming time when Mr. Moss, gnashing his teeth with rage and envy, should daily see Mr. Buller, of Wycherley Court, passing in and out through his ancient gateway. He forgot the possibility that by that time the prosperous tradesman might have expanded into Mr. Moss of some gorgeous villa, standing in its own grounds, far removed from the odours of cheese and bacon, and only come and go between it and his counting-house, as Mr. Buller himself passed and repassed between his private house and his office. He smiled a smile of calm superiority, and replied to his submissive wife with more than usual urbanity.—

"Never mind what they say, Louisa. Vulgar-minded people are always fond of gossip and slander. I think it is very likely Moss will make stock enough out of this business to carry the election; but never mind, time will show who has the best of it. At any rate, I have the satisfaction of feeling that I have done my duty as a landlord the moment the matter was really proved to be of consequence. I don't believe Moss has moved a finger in it yet."

"Oh, yes, he has; at least Miss Witham says so; and one of the things that wicked woman says is that all your work is being 'vamped up,' she calls it, just to make things look right upon the surface, without doing any real good. And Miss Witham thinks you should really take some notice of what's being said."

"I daresay she does. She'd like the excitement

of a regular row, I've no doubt; and if I put Moss into court, and paid no end of money to get fractional damages, and spread all the gossip far and wide, I have no doubt she'd like it a great deal better. These scandal trafficking old maids play the very devil in a place. It's a thousand pities convents have been done away with."

Mr. Buller would hardly have taken this report of the sayings and doings of Monksford so easily, but for the counterpoise of glowing anticipations with which his thoughts were filled. The mortages on the Wycherley estate once safe in his own hands, his path seemed clear from all serious impediments; the goal might be distant, more or less so according to circumstances which could not possibly be forecast, but it was sure. It was true that social depreciation was not a thing to be desired, with such aims in view, but Mr. Buller knew quite enough of the world to feel certain that let him but burst upon Monksford as Mr. Buller of Wycherley Court, and sins of more insignificant days would be no more remembered against him,—openly, that is to say,—he might be maligned in private, by envy and malice, but openly he would be recognised as a man of weight and influence, and would occupy a position befitting his deserts, which would entitle him to be generally magnificent and patronising.

This was the brilliant though distant future on which he counted. The present needed treatment with which he was more conversant than with the lines of action which coming greatness might require of him. The screwing and grinding process must be carried on with more ardour than ever, in

order to ensure that, when the goal was reached, the fortune necessary to enable him fittingly to occupy his new position might be not awanting; and he gave much time and thought that night to the consideration of how this scraping and paring might be most desirably accomplished; that is to say, how it might be so effected as to entail all the unpleasant results upon other people, with the least possible diminution of his own comforts and pleasures; and having hit upon one or two expedients for effecting small economies at the expense of his wife and servant, he retired to bed thoroughly well satisfied with himself.

He betook himself to his office the next morning doubly charged with a sense of his own importanc and was so magnificently condescending to one two people who looked in upon small matters business, that his clerk, who was somewhat of wag, whispered confidentially to an acquainta who brought a note, that the governor was t swollen up with greatness, that if some one did manage to tap him, and let a little of it off, th would be an explosion before long.

Mr. Buller's hope was that Mr. Wycherley w come on horseback, and that the sight of his gr with a couple of horses waiting at the door w proclaim to all Monksford that the lord of Wych manor was holding conference with the great Octavius Buller in the latter's office. But evilly disposed young man took it into his he walk to the town from Eagle's cliff, thereby only disappointing Mr. Buller, but taking hi surprise for no matter of hers gave warning

approach, and, entering suddenly, he found the great man, not seated in state, deeply immersed in important busiess, but standing in an undignified attitude in the outer office, talking to his clerk. It was very mortifying, as in place of his being announced by "my clerk," and received with dignified courtesy, Mr. Buller was forced then and there to receive him himself, and lead the way in a tame common-place style to the inner room.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Wycherley," he said, doing his best to retrieve the situation by the assumption of his very best manner. "I am much honoured by your visit. But it would have given me much pleasure to have waited upon you, if you would have allowed me to do so, instead of your having the trouble of calling here."

"It suited me much better to call on you," Mr. Wycherley shortly replied.

"I trust, sir, that you did not consider the note I ventured to address to you in the light of an impertinent intrusion into your affairs?"

"Of course not, or I should not have come here. At the same time, I confess I can't see why you should be so anxious to advance money at a lower rate of interest than you might get for it."

"I feel it a pleasure, Mr. Wycherley, to be of use to a gentleman whom, you will excuse me if I say it, we Monksford people look upon as, in a measure, belonging to ourselves."

"You are very kind, I am sure. Still, though I confess my acquaintance with business is very limited, it does not, so far as it goes, incline me to believe that business men are apt in general to

allow their feelings to influence the percentage they secure upon their capital."

Mr. Buller began to perceive that it would be desirable to alter the line of tactics he had marked out for himself. He had vague ideas that men not conversant with business were disposed to be romantic, and take somewhat sentimental views of life, unaware that constant dwelling on those enchanted heights of Olympus, which look so alluring to the common herd below, does not incline a man to place unlimited faith in disinterested generosity. With much adroitness he changed his tone.

"Certainly not, sir. Business is business. But it does happen, occasionally, that one can combine two advantages. It is so in the present case. If you ask me to put the matter in a hard, business-like form, it is simply this. Here is a very safe investment, entirely free from any drawbacks in the shape of risk, anxiety, or trouble, lying conveniently also for me at my very door. It is well worth my while to secure it at a lower rate than it would be worth to some man at a greater distance, who would have to spend time and money in ascertaining much that I know without the outlay of a sixpence, or half-an-hour; and who would not, so to speak, have his investment always under his own eye. Do you understand?"

"Yes; that is more like business. You must understand, Mr. Buller," he added, a little haughtily, "that I do not wish to feel in any way under a favour."

"Of course not, sir. This is a mere matter of business. The investment is a convenient one for

me. It is an advantage to you to pay a lower rate of interest for the money advanced—that is all."

"Good. Then, the fact is, there are two mortgages on the property, the interest upon which makes a most confounded gap in my income. I wish you would take them both up."

"I shall be delighted to do so, if possible. Perhaps you will kindly favour me with particulars?"

"Upon my word, I don't know very much about it. You must see Haigg. He can tell you everything. I shall see him this afternoon. I will instruct him to give you all particulars."

"I will arrange to see him at once, sir, and will then let you know upon what terms I can take up the matter. I hope," he added, seeing that Mr. Wycherley made a movement towards his hat, "that you will allow me to offer you a glass of sherry before you leave."

Mr. Wycherley's heart sank, but prudence sounded an alarm, and checked a terror-stricken deprecation of any such trouble on Mr. Buller's part, almost upon his lips. These sort of people were so plaguey touchy, and it would not do to offend the man in the present state of affairs. He faltered forth a faint remonstrance.

"You are very kind, I am sure. It is giving you a great deal of trouble."

"Not in the least. My clerk will bring it instantly."

He rang, and "my clerk," previously instructed, forthwith appeared with the salver. With a sort of cold shiver stealing over him, Mr. Wycherley accepted the proffered glass. Would the fellow see it if he tossed off the wine in one great gulp, as

children are urged to swallow some horrible potion? and would such a course be safe? It would at least be well to test first the class of peril with which he was confronted. He raised the glass to his lips, took the smallest sip, then another, then a mouthful—and set down the glass in mute amazement. Little did he know his man. Catch Mr. Octavius Buller poisoning with bad wine a man presumably a judge on such points, whom he wished to propitiate. The sherry was of a very different class from that which had been poured out for the unfortunate Mr. Smithson. Mr. Wycherley had, in fact, never tasted finer wine, and he openly expressed his admiration.

"Yes, it is good wine," Mr Buller replied, with an air of unaffected candour. "I don't drink much wine, but I must have, what I have, good. I am somewhat of a judge, and bad wine is nothing less than poison to me."

There was already a change in Mr. Buller's manner, slight but perceptible. The interview had ceased to be a purely business one. He was no longer a man of business merely treating for the transfer of a mortgage; he was the host, entertaining his visitor with wine, the like of which, he was very well aware, it did not often fall to the lot of that visitor to taste. Under other circumstances Mr. Wycherley might perhaps have both observed and resented the change. As it was, if he did observe, he was seemingly unconscious. Mr. Octavius Buller was always, in his private nomenclature, "that vulgar brute;" but his sherry was like charity—it covered a multitude of sins. Let no man, however, suppose for a moment that the shrewd and successful Octavius

Buller had allowed himself to be beguiled into weak-minded indulgence of fruitless hospitality, on such a scale. A glass of ordinary sherry, and a biscuit, he would have given with the greatest pleasure to any acquaintance who dropped in to pay him a visit; but not in such a frivolous manner did he waste wine which had cost him the price of that which Mr. Wycherley was then drinking. Its production was quite as much a matter of business, in reality, as his offer to take up the Wycherley mortgages.

As he pronounced his own judgment upon it, he carelessly pushed the bottle across the table again, so that it stood conveniently close beside Mr. Wycherley's half-emptied glass. "Pray fill your glass, sir," he said. "It's quite a pleasure to be able to offer a glass of really drinkable wine to a gentleman who so thoroughly appreciates it. There are very few gentlemen come to my office on business to whom I could offer that wine without feeling that they would just as soon drink a fair light dinner sherry."

"It's splendid wine," Mr. Wycherley said, tossing off, and refilling his glass. "I can't think where you can have got it."

"One of those lucky chances, Mr. Wycherley, which often fall in the way of people who don't walk about with their eyes shut. Just the same sort of chance, sir, as enabled me last week to give you that timely warning about Mr. Mostyn's mare."

"Ah, you did me a most important service there, I confess."

Mr. Buller gave a slight but expressive shrug of his shoulders, which seemed at once to admit the

fact, and deprecate the obligation. "There were a good many people severely bitten, I take it," he said. "But it was for us a very brilliant meeting. We Monksford people, Mr. Wycherley, flatter ourselves that on an occasion of this sort we can make as creditable a show of beauty as any county town in England. I don't know how it may strike a gentleman of your experience? Of course we don't pretend to enter the lists with such a party as occupied the Duke's stand. We only compare ourselves with our own class anywhere else."

"Faith, you might hold your own against all the Duke's set, last week, and not stand in the first rank either! Miss Tollmache was the only really handsome girl there, and I think she's beginning to go off. She isn't, it seems to me, what she was when I saw her two years since in Vienna."

"You pay us a high compliment, I'm sure, sir. I think we can boast of the possession of some very pretty girls in Monksford."

"I can answer for one," replied Mr. Wycherley, who had finished his second glass of sherry, and was in the act of filling his glass for a third time, and whose manner was already thawing into more genial affability, under the influence of the generous liquor. "That doctor's daughter, Miss Playfair, is the prettiest, sweetest, freshest little girl I've seen this many a-day."

"Ah, indeed, you noticed her. Yes, I think, taking it all in all, she's about the prettiest girl in the town. A nice little creature too, very unaffected and amiable. A great friend of my wife's. She's often with us."

"She's a charming little thing, I know. I've a sort of half acquaintance with her, and have spoken to her. She's a regular little wild rose, worth a dozen of your stately, flaunting, high-bred garden plants."

"You've never seen her in the evening, I suppose?"

"No."

"Ah, then you haven't seen her at her best. I don't mean to say she can't stand daylight with her complexion; but she flushes very prettily at night, with a little excitement, and then I must say she is something to look at."

"I can quite believe it. I daresay I shall see her at the county ball."

"I don't think she's very likely to be there. There's more children than money in that house, and not much margin for ball tickets and finery. But we've quite wandered away from business, Mr. Wycherley. I'll see Haigg at once—and then—" He hesitated.

"Let me know, when you've settled, what terms you will offer, and I'll look in upon you again."

"Well, Mr. Wycherley, I was just thinking, if I might venture to suggest such a thing, that if you would do me the honour to dine quite alone with me some evening, we could talk over and arrange everything. I should like very much, indeed, to have your opinion upon some sparkling hock I have, which I think better than that sherry; in fact, I may say privately to you, I'm inclined to think it the finest wine of the kind I ever tasted.

Some of the same lot, sir. Pray, fill your glass again."

"Just half a glass; it's positively quite irresistible. I'm sure you're very kind, Mr. Buller."

"Not at all, sir. The kindness is all on your part. I was about to add that, of course, when any gentleman honours me by accepting what I call one of my little business dinners, Mrs. Buller finds it sometimes a little dull, and so likes to ask some lady friend to spend the evening with her. We might, perhaps, persuade her to invite Miss Playfair on this occasion, and then you would have an opportunity of judging of her looks in the evening."

Mr. Wycherley's last half glass of sherry had represented a good half bottle as his share. He had become quite cordial and friendly. "I'll dine with you with pleasure, my dear fellow," he said, "and by all means get your wife to ask the little beauty."

"Then we had better fix the day at once. I shall be certain to find out all I need know by the end of the week. Shall we say next Monday evening, at seven o'clock? We quiet people keep early hours, sir, you know."

"By all means. Next Monday, at seven. I'll not forget. A good stroke of business, good wine and a pretty girl. By Jove! that's enough to clinch any fellow's memory. Good-bye, Mr. Buller. I'll see Haigg at once."

Mr. Wycherley grasped Mr. Buller's hand almost with fervour, shook it warmly, and left the office in a genial mellowed frame of mind, inclining towards universal good-will, and leading him to declare to

himself that after all Buller was not half a bad fellow, and certainly improved on acquaintance, as a little of the pompous stiffness of his manner wore off.

Mr. Buller walked to the window when his visitor was gone, and stood there looking out, and whistling softly to himself. A better stroke of business he had never, he flattered himself, effected, and entirely too, thanks to his own adroitness in seizing upon favourable chances. How firmly convinced so ever a man may be of his own supereminent excellence, the contemplation of a special and strongly marked instance of the same is always pleasant, so Mr. Buller's meditations that afternoon were most agreeable. The whole of the Wycherley mortgages as good as already in his own hands, and a further train successfully laid to aid in bringing about such results as he desired. Mr. Wycherley was evidently very much taken with Rose Playfair. Let him only get entangled in any way with her, and it would greatly aid in decreasing all chance of his ever caring to come and live at Wycherley Court. If he married her, then there was a large, and, as the children married off, a probably increasing tribe of poor relations swarming all about his doors; to say nothing of the fact that Mrs. Playfair was the daughter of a respectable innkeeper in a town not thirty miles distant. Such associations were not likely to render Wycherley Court ever a pleasant or desirable residence for the heir of the long line of Wycherleys who had reigned there for centuries, adding to their pomp and glory by many noble ialliances, and occasionally improving their blood

by some low marriage. If he did not marry the girl—well, Mr. Buller was never gratuitously ill-natured, he sincerely trusted no harm might accrue to her from the acquaintance; still if, as he vaguely expressed it, Mr. Wycherley got entangled with her, without any marriage, it would equally, perhaps still more, render his ever settling at Wycherley Court improbable. Yes, under all circumstances, he could not but regard the transactions of the day as most satisfactory. That bottle of his choice sherry had not been wasted.

That reflection brought him back to the present moment, and turning round to the table he took up the decanter, and measured with his eye the quantity left. He had drunk but sparingly himself. Mr. Buller never did otherwise as long as business was under consideration. There was full a third of the bottle left. Was it worth corking up? Was it likely to serve for anyone for whom it was worth reserving? Haigg? Certainly not! He probably did not know good wine from bad, and, if he did, was the last man to be open to any such seductive influences where his master's business was concerned. Nor was there anyone else likely to come to him on business whom he would care to propitiate with his prime sherry, for a longer time than it was desirable to keep the wine standing in a decanter. Clearly, therefore, it was a case in which good policy went charmingly hand in hand with self-gratification. The best thing he could do would be to drink the wine himself.

This he accordingly proceeded to do, with great deliberation, not swallowing the precious fluid with

greedy vulgar rapidity, but sipping it slowly, with the calm appreciation of a connoisseur, as he turned over some business papers, and wrote a few letters, which was all the work he had before him for that day. Having finished both wine and work, he sallied forth from his office in much the same state of genial good-will towards all mankind produced by the same cause in Mr. Wycherley, and stalking majestically down the High Street, almost ran against Rose Playfair, as she came out from the gateway of Wycherley Court.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISS TOLLMACHE IS PUZZLED, AND MR. BULLER ENTERTAINS.

KATE TOLLMACHE had lost no time in carrying out her promise to the rector, but had that very same evening sent a note to Rose Playfair, asking her to lunch with her the following day. A breathing space had been accorded to her between the races and the ball. The status of Ripley Lodge being such that feminine guests were a matter of some importance to Mrs. Mostyn, she had invited Lady Clanraven and her daughters thither, for a few days, holding out as an inducement a casual mention that Colonel Twyford was staying in the house. Lady Clanraven, deeply impressed with the Christian duty of affording her support and countenance to poor dear Mrs. Mostyn in her tried position, had accordingly decamped from Wycherley Court, and left her niece to herself.

The task she had undertaken was by no means one to Miss Tollmache's liking. To act mentor is ever a perilous venture. Given that you escape the

danger of gravely censuring some delinquency or impropriety which you are constantly in the habit of committing yourself—a far more common peril than they who love the task of setting other people right are prone to believe—the path is thickly strown with the pitfalls of injudicious interference, total misunderstanding of the situation, partial misapprehensions, or a dozen other traps and snares. Of all these risks Miss Tollmache was very well aware, and was very much inclined to regard the attempt to put the girl upon her guard as a very doubtful sort of forlorn hope, to be ventured only because there was nothing else which could be done.

To make it apparent to Rose Playfair that she had been bidden to the Court for the express purpose of being warned against a danger which, as long as the world lasts, will possess a certain amount of fascination for a pretty girl, was not a course to be desired under the circumstances. Miss Tollmache could only watch for a favourable chance, trusting to her wits to aid her in bringing the subject forward in some apparently accidental manner, should no such favourable opportunity arise in the natural course of things.

Rose arrived in high spirits. George had looked in that morning, bringing with him a charming present in jewelry, which some bachelor friend had sent as an offering to his bride-elect; and had made her go again to look at the house, where everything was going on most satisfactorily. Then he had shown her some patterns of most charming materials for fitting up her boudoir, and she had

chosen one which she thought was the most exquisite thing she had ever seen; and she had discussed drawing-room curtains, and dining-room carpets, with a most satisfactory sense of her own growing importance. George had left her at the Wycherley gateway, and as she walked up the avenue she had been indulging in enchanting visions. Her boudoir would be quite as pretty as Miss Tollmache's, and the entrance thereto would be only accorded to her most particular friends. Yet she drew a picture of herself, in a most lovely and becoming dress, which she meant should be one of her trousseau dresses, lounging over afternoon tea, with Mr. Wycherley looking admiration unspeakable, though perfectly respectful, from a short distance.

They would not be entirely alone, of course. She altogether disapproved of married women receiving gentlemen in that way. She would always have some one with her. Alice, perhaps, or even Lucy, would be quite sufficient. At any rate, some one. She fully intended that every one should say that young Mrs. George Huddlestone was as discreet as she was pretty, and knew very well how to take care of herself; and that George Huddlestone was one of those fortunate men who could accept all the implied compliment to himself, of men's admiration of his beautiful wife, without any sombre background of uneasy sensations.

She described her beautiful locket, and the future glories of her boudoir, to Miss Tollmache in glowing terms, and chattered about the races and the Duchess's dress with much animation.

"Is His Serene Highness really such a bore as they say?" She asked at last.

"Who told you he was a bore?" Kate asked, thinking fortune was about to befriend her unexpectedly.

"I heard Colonel Twyford say so to Mr. Mostyn on the course," she replied.

"Yes, he is a great bore, save when he can be induced not to speak what he imagines to be English," replied the baffled mentor, a dim suspicion beginning to spring up within her, as Rose chatted on, that she was designedly avoiding all leads which might bring Mr. Wycherley's name forward, and feeling that if such were really the case, the danger was greater than she had supposed.

"You must come and look at the garden," she said, as they rose from the luncheon table. "A good deal has been done since you were last here."

They crossed the terrace together, and Rose paused in admiration at the top of the steps leading down to the garden.

"Oh, Miss Tollmache," she exclaimed; "how beautiful it is beginning to look!"

"Yes. The work done is really beginning to tell now."

"I can hardly believe it is the same place I used to come to when we were all children. How much Mr. Tollmache has done for it!"

"I do not think Mr. Wycherley will have any reason to complain of his tenant, certainly."

"Has Mr. Tollmache a long lease?" Rose asked, pouncing upon her opportunities with laudable alacrity?"

"The ordinary one, with a break at five years."

"But you will not go away then?"

"I do not know. Perhaps when we have put everything in good trim for him, Mr. Wycherley will choose to come and live here himself." Then in desperation she took the plunge. "You know Mr. Wycherley, Rose?"

"I have spoken to him," Rose answered, with a perfect straightforwardness of look and tone which effectually banished the fears which had been springing up in her companion's mind. "But how did you know it?"

"You bowed to him on the race course," Miss Tollmache replied, with perfect candour, so far as it went; for the fact was indisputable, and her own position had been such that she might perfectly well have seen the salutation, had she chanced to have been looking in that direction at the moment.

"So I did. But I am not sure whether I ought to have done so. I did it almost involuntarily. I had only spoken to him once, soon after we met him riding. I happened to meet him when he was not quite sure about his road, and he asked me to tell him; and then he told me he knew who I was. That was the extent of our acquaintance."

Miss Tollmache glanced sharply at her. The girl was no consummate actress, of that she was certain; yet her colour did not change in the least, and there was not a trace of consciousness in her expression. Had these people found a mare's nest, and made over a heap of addled eggs to her care? Could it be possible that Mr. Smithson's story of the note was only one of those most misleading of fictions, a fact and the nferences therefrom pounded up together in one

inseparable mass? She knew not what to think, but having made her opening she determined no less to profit by it.

"Not a startling amount of intimacy certainly," she replied. "I am very glad your acquaintance with Mr. Wycherley is so slight a one. Do try, dear Rose, and keep it so, for indeed he is no desirable acquaintance for any girl."

If the quiet unconsciousness of Rose's manner had surprised Miss Tollmache before, the change produced in her by these few words astonished her a great deal more. Like very many rather characterless people, Rose Playfair could, on occasions, burst into sudden small tempests of fierce wrath; and though she stood too much in awe of Miss Tollmache to indulge in such manifestations of temper as she might have done in the case of her mother or sister, it was still very evident that, for some reason or other, her friend's mildly worded caution had made her very angry. She grew crimson, and her blue eyes flashed in a way quite new to Miss Tollmache.

"As I am to be married in about six months, now," she said, in a rather sharp pitched tone, "and as Mr. Wycherley is not very likely to be in this neighbourhood, I do not think his acquaintance is likely to be very dangerous to me."

"I trust, my dear, that in no case it would be dangerous to you, in any way which it lay with yourself to prevent, but you are very young, and have not had much experience of the world, and Mr. Wycherley is just the man to take advantage of that fact to amuse himself at your expense, without

the least caring to what extent he might compromise you."

"Well, Miss Tollmache, of course you have seen a great deal more of the world than I have, and therefore it seems very presumptuous of me to set up my opinion against yours. But I really do think you are hard upon Mr. Wycherley."

"My dear Rose!"

"Yes, indeed I do," she continued, her little hurricane of indignation subsiding rapidly, as the question became rather an abstract discussion of Mr. Wycherley's moral shortcomings, than a consideration of her own relations to him. "Of course, I daresay he has been very dissipated, and all that; but I do think he is quite a gentleman, and would not act, as you say. I am sure nothing could be more respectful than his manner to me."

She stopped a trifle abruptly. "Always" she had been going to add, but she checked the dangerous admission just in time. "Always" could hardly be applied to the one accidental interview to which she had restricted her avowal.

"A very bad symptom in Mr. Wycherley's case, Rose," Miss Tollmache gravely replied. "It proves that you have attracted him sufficiently to make him wish to make a favourable impression on you. You must know that you are a very pretty girl. You are certainly not one whom he would be likely to pass unnoticed. Had he not wished, for some reason, to impress you favourably, he would have displayed a bold, insolent admiration, which could hardly have failed to annoy you."

Rose thought of the first glance which she had

received from Mr. Wycherley, and of the difference in his glances now, and in her secret heart she knew Miss Tollmache's words were true, but she did not choose to admit it. She was, however, quite mollified by the compliment paid to her, and replied, with a pretty little pleading expression,—

"Dear Miss Tollmache, don't think me very obstinate if I say you don't quite convince me. How can I think so ill of a man who is so very gentlemanlike and respectful? It seems so unkind. But really it is of no consequence. I daresay I shall not see him again at all, unless I should happen to go to the ball, which I don't think is the least likely. And, of course, should he be about here after I am married, it will not in the least matter."

Of this, Kate Tollmache was by no means so certain. Good, honest, sterling George Huddlestone was not quite the man to have the care of a pretty, silly young wife; and Mr. Wycherley was infinitely more likely to be a dangerous acquaintance to Rose Huddlestone than to Rose Playfair. But it was no use to begin casting up defences against hypothetical perils at a remote distance. She felt partially reassured, but nevertheless very much puzzled. There was certainly no such understanding between the two as to account for the mysterious note, and yet that episode remained unexplained. She had, however, done the utmost which lay in her power, and was fain to accept Rose's assurances of her own perfect safety, not from any strong conviction which her words carried with them, but rather because she had no plausible hypothesis to the contrary to urge. She could only fall back upon her own expressed

hope to the rector, that the wolf would depart to more congenial hunting grounds.

Rose Playfair's outward serenity was perfectly restored as she strolled about the garden and grounds, admiring all the improvements which had been made, and occasionally venturing on rather wild suggestions; but as she walked back along the avenue towards the town, her indignation flamed up fiercely again. She, at that moment, was mingling up facts and inferences in her mind in misleading entanglement. At the first word of warning from Miss Tollmache, the recollection of what George Huddlestone had said upon the race-course had flashed through her mind, followed by the instant conclusion that he was the secret prompter of Miss Tollmache's remonstrances, attempting a sort of indirect coercion of her freedom of action by underhand use of an influence to which he imagined she would certainly yield. No delusion could have been more unfortunate with regard to its effect on the really friendly caution she had received. There was no interference which Rose Playfair was so ready jealously to resent, as any assumption of pre-marital authority on the part of George Huddleston. She was quite prepared already to make sweet and graceful concessions to his wishes and feelings, so long as these concessions were purely voluntary on her part. But to anything approaching dictation from him on any subject, she was certainly not prepared to submit. This was all George's doing! She was sure of it; and what must Miss Tollmache think of her, when she found that even the man to whom she was shortly to be married was afraid of any

acquaintance between her and Mr. Wycherley? It was most unjustifiable of George ever to have said a word on the subject, and not at all an honest, straightforward thing, to go in that way and try to make use of some one else's influence. His doing so just showed that he knew he had no right to interfere.

Thus she reasoned, and who shall say that her reasoning was a whit more unreasonable than a vast deal which is produced in much more logical form? At anyrate, by the time she reached the great gateway, she had worked herself up into a high state of indignant reprehension of the unfair manner in which she had been treated by the offending George, and it was in this frame of mind that she encountered Mr. Octavius Buller.

"Ah, Miss Playfair, how do you do?" he exclaimed, with a sort of patronising effusiveness of manner, resulting from a mingling of natural consciousness of superiority with the genial influences of his own excellent wine. Been visiting your friend at the Court? A charming place, and an equally charming woman—eh?"

"Yes, I have been lunching with Miss Tollmache," Rose answered, with somewhat more cordiality than she was wont to bestow upon Mr. Buller. She liked him no better than did most of his neighbours and acquaintances. But it was very nice to be met by anyone just coming away from Wycherley Court, and to be able to speak of having been to luncheon there. "Have you been at the Court lately, Mr. Buller?"

There was a touch of malice in the question. She knew he had no entrance there.

"Not for some time. Gad! I ought to see Tollmache, too, but I have been so deucedly busy, I have hardly had time to eat or sleep. Ah, Miss Rose, you ladies, going out to lunch, and chat with your friends, little know what galley slaves we poor men are with large businesses to attend to. But you'll know more about that sort of thing soon, I'll warrant. Now, would you believe it, this very day I've been obliged to ask a gentleman of fortune, with whom I have some most important business to transact, to come and dine with me, to talk it over, for I positively can't fix a time to see him in business hours for the next fortnight. It's really a confounded nuisance that one can't even have one's evenings to oneself. Ah, you ladies have the best of it."

"Some may; I don't know about all," Rose replied, thinking of poor, pale, depressed-looking little Mrs. Buller, with strong doubts whether, in the Buller establishment, she could possibly be held to have the best, or even any considerable good of anything.

"Speaking of that reminds me, Miss Playfair, I was thinking of asking a great favour of you."

"Of me?" Rose said, in much surprise.

"Yes. You can, of course, understand that when I have a gentleman dining with me, with a view to business, it is a little dull for Mrs. Buller, and on this occasion the gentleman is quite a stranger to her. She would take it very kind of you if you would come in and dine with us."

Rose did not reply for a moment, so utter was her amazement. She had once or twice gone to tea at the Bullers' house, but an invitation to dine

there was an event altogether without precedent. "You are very kind," she stammered at last. "I am sure I shall be very happy, if it will be any pleasure to Mrs. Buller."

"It will, indeed. She will be charmed. I can assure you she thinks a great deal of you, Miss Playfair. My wife is a very quiet person. She is not demonstrative. But she has her favourites all the same; and you are very near the top of that list, Miss Rose, I can tell you."

Rose positively laughed at this; she could not help it. The suggestion of her being a special favourite with a woman with whom she did not exchange ten sentences in a year seemed too absurd. "Old humbug! he thinks it is time to make up to me," she mentally ejaculated. "I shall be very glad to be of use to Mrs. Buller," she said.

"Thank you, thank you; you are very kind. Monday is the day—next Monday—at seven. Then we shall expect you. Mrs. Buller will be delighted. Good-bye! Don't forget Monday—seven o'clock."

"I won't forget," she answered, turning to pursue her way home. "What can he want me to dine there for, especially on this occasion?" she said to herself. "Can it be only a compliment? What other object can he have?" She almost laughed aloud at the thought of his gravely suggesting consideration for his wife as the cause of his request, and was dismissing the problem from consideration as insolvable, when a sudden perception of the truth darted across her thoughts, and brought a quick crimson flush all over her face. The expected guest had important business to transact with Mr. Buller, and was a

stranger to Mrs. Buller. Mr. Wycherley had spoken to her of business between himself and Mr. Buller, and he was certainly entirely unacquainted with Mrs. Buller. She needed no further proof of the correctness of her surmise; and then—to what was she indebted for this invitation?

That point puzzled her a good deal. Mr. Buller could have no possible reason for asking her to meet Mr. Wycherley. Her presence could in no way further his business arrangements, or, as far as she could see, advance his interests. There was only one solution of the enigma. The suggestion must have come from Mr. Wycherley himself, if not in actual definite form, at least in some such shape as had made it clear to Mr. Buller that her presence on the occasion would be gratifying to the man whom he at the moment was evidently anxious to conciliate in every possible way.

This idea threw her into a state of considerable internal conflict. It never for an instant occurred to her to question whether her inferences and convictions were indisputable. To her it was absolutely certain that George Huddlestone, in a spirit of unjustifiable interference, had invoked the aid of Miss Tollmache to bring about his own ends, and that Mr. Wycherley had asked, or in some way induced, Mr. Buller to invite her to meet him at dinner. She was not so far gone in folly but that this latter assumption startled her not a little, and strongly inclined her, at the moment, to back out of her acceptance of the invitation. The betrayal of such a wish on Mr. Wycherley's part to Mr. Buller, under what pretext soever it might have been veiled, was

not at all a desirable circumstance. She had no objection to being admired by the handsome Frenchman. In fact, even if it went further, there was a fine touch of romance in the thought of mounting a lofty pedestal of matrimonial fidelity, and looking down with calm, tender pity upon the hapless victim of a hopeless passion groaning at its foot. A beautiful young wife devoted to a good but rather commonplace husband, and bestowing only a cold and virtuous commiseration upon a handsome and fascinating adorer, was a spectacle she would have liked well enough to exhibit before the wondering eyes of Monksford; for her experience of life had not reached the point of teaching her the fact that, under the careful administration of those large-hearted, kindly rules which regulate the general conduct of social life, the loyal wife is, under such circumstances, infinitely more likely to be severely mauled by the virtuous censors of public morality than the presumably far more cautious sinner. But she had no wish that Mr. Buller should be in any way mixed up in the matter; and but for her present mood of smothered irritation against the cruelly misjudged George, she would probably have gone straight home and written a note of excuse to Mrs. Buller, on some plausible plea. But her irritation drew her strongly in the opposite direction. Here was a fine opportunity for asserting her independence; her right to make acquaintance with whom she chose, and her perfect ability to take good care of herself. There was no use in deciding hastily what she would do; it would be much better to think over the matter, and settle more at leisure what course to

take. She would say nothing about the invitation at home, but would consider about it that night, and then, if she resolved upon drawing back, there would be plenty of time to write to Mrs. Buller the next day.

Fortune, however, did not set fair that day for the triumph of prudence. She was busy at tea describing the beauties of the Court, and retailing small pieces of information which had casually dropped from Miss Tollmache to her mother and sisters, when her father came in.

"So, Rose," he said, the moment he entered, "I hear you are going to dine with the Bullers. What an important person you are becoming! I was never in my life asked to dine in that house."

Rose laughed. "Who told you, papa?"

"Buller himself. I met him just now."

"You dine with the Bullers, my dear?" her mother said. "You had not told us that."

"I had not got so far, mamma. I met him as I was coming home, and he asked me."

"Well, that's queer," said Mrs. Playfair, who had sharply-defined ideas respecting the small proprieties of life. "I should have thought such an invitation should have come from Mrs. Buller."

"Oh, it isn't to a party, mamma. Mr. Buller has some gentleman coming to dine with him, to talk about some business, and he asked me to come, because he says it is dull for Mrs. Buller."

"I wonder when he learned to be so considerate for her, poor little soul? Who is the gentleman?"

"He didn't say. He only said he was a stranger. I don't much care about going."

"Oh, my dear, you had better go, if it will be any pleasure to Mrs. Buller to have you. I'm sure the poor woman has little enough pleasure of any sort."

"Mamma! you don't suppose it's really that. I've no doubt he's after something he doesn't want mentioned before her, and wants to make safe against anything being said in her presence."

"Well, there can't be any harm in your going."

Rose's reflection that night came pretty much to this. What could she do, now her own people had heard of the invitation, and her mother wished her to go? What plausible excuse could she urge, at home, for drawing back? And after all, when you came to think of it, Mr. Buller had given her no hint that the guest was Mr. Wycherley; he could not know of her reasons for divining the fact, or suspect that she had any idea of anything in the invitation behind his alleged reasons. Even should anything ever hereafter be said upon the subject, no blame could possibly be laid upon her, as long as she herself discreetly kept her own council. Yes, carefully and calmly considered, the best thing she could possibly do was to go; and having settled that matter she turned her thoughts to the all-important subject of her dress on the occasion, and fell asleep revolving the various merits of different styles of hair-dressing.

Rose Playfair fully bore out Mr. Buller's eulogiums to Mr. Wycherley on her appearance in the evening, when she entered Mrs. Buller's drawing-room a few minutes after seven on the following Monday. This fact, in the present case, she owed to some

extent to a slight touch of coquetry. She was not going to let Mr. Wycherley suppose she had dressed herself with special care on his sole account; otherwise the "charming costume" in which she had appeared at the races would, she judged, have been just the very dress for such an occasion. Instead, therefore, of smothering herself up into the shapeless mass which was the ultimate result of its endless complications of perfectly meaningless adornment, she placed some fresh white frilling at the throat and wrists of the plainest evening dress she possessed, fastened a spray of flowers in her beautiful hair, and with the delicate flush which excitement brought to her cheeks adding fresh brightness to her blue eyes, was as fair a picture of blooming girlhood as any man need care to see.

Mr. Wycherley was in the drawing-room when she entered, forming one of a strangely-assorted trio. Mrs. Buller, with her sandy hair fluffed out under a hideous little erection intended for a cap, and clad in a dingy-looking silk, ornamented with strange bows and ends of ribbon, by way of trimming, was sitting bolt upright on a sofa, her wan complexion slightly tinged by colour, produced by worry and nervous excitement; for she knew, by the extent and nature of his preparations, that her husband regarded the occasion as a special one, and what would be the consequences of any failure in her department. The general impression produced by Mr. Buller, when dressed for the evening, was of unlimited and pretentious shirt-front. At the present moment he positively bristled with dignity, till even the very atmosphere around him seemed

charged almost to the point of explosion with his immense importance, as he stood there, in his own house, the entertainer of Mr. Wycherley of Wycherley Court. And he—? "Oh!" Rose thought, "if George could only be made to look like him when dressed for the evening!" Mr. Wycherley's coat looked as if it must have been made upon him, and never taken off; whereas George's dress coat had always creases in it, and looked as if, from constant dangling by the neck from a peg, it had acquired a permanent tendency to hang straight down the back, with a slight inclination to protrusion about the tails; and his shirt-front was always baggy and capricious in its proceedings, in case of sudden movements; whereas Mr. Wycherley's shirt-front looked as if not even the practice of violent gymnastics could have disturbed its unruffled composure of faultless set; it seemed to be as much a part of himself as all the rest of his dress.

He got up as Rose entered, but he made no movement until Mr. Buller, mindful of the unconsciousness which it was fitting he should assume, was preparing to introduce him. Then he interrupted him by advancing and offering his hand.

"Miss Playfair and I do not need an introduction, Mr. Buller. I had the honour of introducing myself on a certain occasion, when she was good enough to rescue me from a wild attempt to find a non-existent back entrance to my own house. What an ass you must have thought me, Miss Playfair!"

"No, indeed."

"Well, I thought I looked very like one. But I

certainly fancied I remembered my father speaking of a back entrance to the grounds."

"I don't think there was ever but one entrance to the Court—was there, Octavius?" put in poor Mrs. Buller, whose whole soul was absorbed in listening for sounds from the dining-room, but who had a vague idea it would be rude if she did not say something occasionally, it did not much matter what.

"Oh, no! I am sure now there was none," Mr. Wycherley replied—Mr. Buller only condescending to notice this puny conversational effort with a vindictive glance. "But, to return to our subject, Mr. Buller, do you really, as a professional man, think the verdict of the jury a mistake? and that the man must have known the condition of the house when he took it?"

Mr. Buller, with professional condescension, proceeded to explain his views of the case under discussion, and Rose was left to the care of Mrs. Buller, whose efforts for her entertainment did not get much beyond occasional spasmodic inquiries after the health of various members of her family.

Throughout dinner the same state of things prevailed. Once and again Mr. Wycherley made some remark to Mrs. Buller or herself, but, though no business was discussed, his attention was mainly directed to his host, and, to tell the truth, Rose began to feel a trifle sulky. She did not care about sitting there to be a silent witness of Mrs. Buller's agonised efforts to discharge the duties of hostess, or to reply to an occasional observation from Mr. Buller. She did not detect, what he did, that her attention was never safely diverted from the opposite

side of the table by either Mrs. Buller or himself, without Mr. Wycherley's eyes being instantly fixed upon her. "Good," he said to himself, "that will work. George Huddlestone may look out." It is not to be supposed that he bore George Huddlestone any malice, still, he had employed Norton Fletcher, of Willesbury, as the architect of his new house, which was a distinct slight to a fellow-townsman, especially as every one knew that Fletcher was a mere tyro, instead of a man of established reputation.

After dinner, however, while Rose was covertly yawning in the drawing-room, and devoutly wishing she had stayed at home, business was transacted in the dining-room, in the shape of a declaration on Mr. Buller's part of his willingness to take up the whole of the mortgages on the Wycherley estate, at a considerably lower rate of interest than they were bearing at that moment, and of a ready agreement to his proposals on the part of Mr. Wycherley, who cared not a straw in whose hands the mortgages were, so long as his income was increased by the lowering of the interest.

"Very well, sir," Mr. Buller concluded. "I am delighted to find my proposals meet with your approval. I will at once put the matter in train. No more wine, sir? Then shall we join the ladies? If you will be kind enough to go to the drawing-room, I'll follow you in a moment."

Mr. Wycherley accordingly made his way to the drawing-room, while Mr. Buller remained behind, to secure safely under lock and key the wine and fruit left upon the table; a precaution with respect to the

more substantial remnants of the feast which Mrs. Buller had slipped down to the kitchen to effect immediately on leaving the dining-room, well knowing that she would be called to account were even so much as a chicken's leg missing the next day.

In the drawing-room Mrs. Buller was busy in preparing tea and coffee at a side table. Such matters in the Buller establishment were not entrusted to the evil natures of servants, who, from even carefully measured out supplies of material might abstract small quantities for private use. She had a mysterious and complicated coffee apparatus, by means of which coffee was made at the cost of such infinite labour and difficulty, that she was quite certain it must be superlatively excellent. Her attention was, therefore, at the moment fully occupied, and Rose was seated alone, turning over the leaves of a book on the table.

Mr. Wycherley came straight to her side at once. A quartette dinner of this description was not favourable for confidential communications, and he knew, if he meant to make any use of this opportunity, it behoved him to lose no time.

"Am I to have my waltz?" he asked, in a low tone.

She shook her head.

"Really? Do you really mean that you do not purpose being at the ball? I made certain you would manage it in some way."

"I do not think there is a chance."

"How fortunate, then, that I am in a position to

save myself from the great disappointment of losing that waltz."

"How so?"

His answer was to produce two ball tickets, and lay them on the table beside her. Rose flushed crimson.

"Oh, Mr. Wycherley," she said, "you are very kind! But I really cannot accept them."

"Why not?"

"I—I—really cannot. It is very kind of you, but I really could not think of allowing you to give them to me."

"My dear Miss Playfair, you will drive me to a most ungallant admission; force me, in fact, to show myself a perfect brute."

"What do you mean?"

"Would that I could declare I had waded through fire and flood, and won those tickets at the cannon's mouth. Alas! truth compels me to admit that I am bound to get rid of them, and don't know what on earth to do with them. You will relieve me from a perfect incubus by accepting them."

She still looked at him hesitatingly.

"I do assure you I speak the truth. The case stands thus: I have been peremptorily ordered by Lady Jarvis to take some tickets. She declares it to be a matter of duty for me, as belonging to the county—saving the mark!—to do so. My firm belief is she buys a lot, and then sells them to her guests, getting all the credit to herself for liberally supporting the county institutions. At any rate, she forced tickets upon me, and what on earth can I do with them? There, now, you have it. I have

shown myself a brute. Show that you forgive me by taking them."

"You are very kind to offer them, I am sure."

"I am nothing of the sort. Be the angel you look," he added, in almost a whisper, "and render a ball once more an object of attraction to me. It is long since I have looked upon one as anything save a monstrous nuisance. Put them in your pocket," he added quickly, as the door opened to admit Mr. Buller.

Rose hastily, almost mechanically, obeyed, and the deed was done.

"Miss Playfair and I are disagreeing over these illustrations, Mr. Buller," he said, turning round with the utmost composure. "She likes them; I think them rather common-place. What do you think?"

"Really, sir, I'm not much of a judge of such things. I daresay you are right. Will you drink tea or coffee, Mr. Wycherley?"

"Neither, thank you, but Miss Playfair, I see, is pining for some tea. Please bring her a cup. What is your favourite waltz?" he continued, as Mr. Buller crossed the room to execute the behest.

"Oh, the Skylark!" she replied. "Do you know it?"

He shook his head.

"It is delicious. It seems to make one fly almost?"

"It shall be the second played—the *second*, mind, not the first. It will be safer; I am not entirely my own master as to the time of arriving. And now, good-night. I have accomplished all I came here

for, and need endure no longer. I shall count the hours until Thursday night."

He held her hand for a moment with a gentle pressure, which gave point to his words. Then Mr. Buller returned with the cup of tea, having been quite prudent enough to hesitate about cream, and find a difficulty about the right amount of sugar. Mr. Wycherley forthwith wished his host and hostess good-night, deprecating their fussy attentions with a slight touch of haughtiness, and made his way out, leaving Rose in far too violent a turmoil of excited feeling to allow her, for the time, even to remember that she was George Huddlestone's promised wife!

CHAPTER XIX.

HIS SERENE HIGHNESS ELECTRIFIES MONKSFORD.

ROSE PLAYFAIR was not long in following Mr. Wycherley's example, not finding any special enjoyment in the society of Mr. and Mrs. Buller, so it was not late when she reached home. But hours were early in the Playfair establishment, and to her great satisfaction all was silent and dark in the house. She lighted her candle and crept softly up stairs, rejoicing to find Alice fast asleep.

She was in no humour for sleep herself, so she wrapped a shawl round her, and putting out the light, sat down at the window and looked out into the still moonlight. Surely, at that moment, if gifted with a fitting romantic sensibility, the handsome engaged ring which George had given her should have been pricking, or burning, or crushing her finger. It did not do anything of the kind. Neither it nor George, in the first instance, occupied any place at all in her thoughts. She merely sat going over, in a sort of excited reverie, all that had passed during the evening. Then, as the turmoil of sensa-

tion began to subside a little, her mood inclined towards lofty pathos. There could be no doubt of it. Mr. Wycherley was deeply and desperately in love. The *rôle* she would be called upon to fill would be that of tender but exalted pity for a wild and hopeless passion. Of course, for Mr. Wycherley's own sake, she must be very careful not to encourage it; but she must be kind and gentle. It was so very sad! She only hoped she might be able to influence him for his own good. And the current of her thoughts floated on, until she found herself, in imagination, gently but firmly rebuking, as Mrs. George Huddlestone, a passionate declaration of love, and pointing out to him that if he could not overcome this unfortunate sentiment, her duty as a wife would compel her to forbid him to enter her house. Then her thoughts came back to the present, and to the ball tickets. Mr. Wycherley's explanations on the subject of course quite removed all objection to her using them. Her mother, she knew, would think nothing of it. The only point for consideration was, what George might say?

She had no intention of yielding the point; but she did not want to have any words with him on the subject if she could help it. He was such a dear, good fellow, and though it was of course very wrong of him to have spoken to Miss Tollmache, really, after all, was it any wonder if he felt a little uneasy? The best thing would be to say nothing to him about the tickets, and he would probably never think of asking any question about them. Her mother, she knew, would not go to the ball;

she must coax her father to go with her: and if she told George her father was going to take her to the ball, he would never dream but that Doctor Playfair had taken the tickets himself.

Having settled this matter, and thought a little while over her dress, and the beautiful Skylark Waltz, and the delight of dancing it with Mr. Wycherley, she at last prepared for going to bed, looking at her peacefully sleeping sister with a sense of vast superiority, and murmuring,—

"Dear child! Long may such peaceful, untroubled sleep be hers."

And then she was very soon asleep herself, not appearing to be much more heavily weighted with disturbing dreams than was Alice.

She was greeted with a whole battery of questions when she appeared at breakfast the next morning. How had she got on? What sort of a dinner was it? And had Mrs. Buller a decent dress? And what time did she come in? Then at last came, from her mother, the question she had been expecting,—

"And who was the gentleman, Rose?"

"You would never guess, mamma. It was Mr. Wycherley."

"Mr. Wycherley? Why, whatever business can he have with Buller?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I heard no business talked about. But they were a very long time before they came to the drawing-room," she added, with a dreary remembrance of the tedium of that *tête-a-tête* with Mrs. Buller,—"so I suppose they were settling it then. But, mamma, I have some-

thing else to tell you. I have got two tickets for the ball."

"My dear child, George really spoils you a great deal too much."

A disclaimer rose to her lips, but a second thought checked it. Would it not be safer to leave her mother's harmless mistake uncorrected? She had hardly time to turn the thought over in her mind, when Mrs. Playfair spoke again.

"What are you going to do about a dress, my dear?"

"Oh, I can manage that quite well. I shall only want a little ribbon, and a few flowers."

"But who is to go with you? You cannot go with George. Is Mrs. Huddlestone going?"

"I don't know. I doubt whether George will go; he hates dancing. Papa must go with me."

"My dear child, that is asking a great deal."

"Well, you or he must go, mamma. It is only once, and it will be a grand ball this year. The Duchess is sure to wear her diamonds, and I do want so much to see them."

"It must be your father then, my dear. I am sure I haven't a dress I could go to a ball in."

"I know papa will take me. If he doesn't like to stay the whole time, he could leave me with Mrs. Daniels, or some one. There will be plenty of people there whom we know. Now I must go out and get the things I want. I have not too much time to get my dress ready."

She tripped away on her errand, and in the High Street she met George.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" he asked, turning to walk with her.

"To Hammond's. Oh, George, I'm to go to the ball! Papa is going to take me. Are you going?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought about it. I had no idea you would go. Do you want me to come?"

"Of course I do," she replied, wincing a little, as her conscience gave her a little prick; for she was very conscious that she would not be very sorry if George did absent himself. "But mind, George, you are not to say a word about the ball in our house."

"Why not?"

"Because it really is rather hard upon poor Alice to hear all these things discussed, and get no share of them; though of course she isn't out yet. But still it does disappoint her, poor child!"

"You are a kind little Rosebud," he said, smiling down upon her; and again she winced. "You'll be able to take her yourself next year. Fancy you acting duenna! Well, I'm glad you are going to the ball this year; it will be a good one. I suppose the Tollmaches won't be there."

"Why not?" she asked, stiffening a little at the name.

"I thought they were going away."

"So they are, but not till after the ball."

"I almost fancied they were gone. I have not seen Miss Tollmache since the race day."

Rose experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling. She was wrong then! George had nothing to do with Miss Tollmache's assumption of the office of

mentor. She turned towards him with a very loving look.

"There is one thing, George, if I go to the ball—"

"What, my pet?"

"Mr. Wycherley is sure to be there. Perhaps he will want me to dance with him."

"Well, and what then?"

"I thought you didn't like my having anything to say to him. I thought you wouldn't like me to dance with him, perhaps."

"My dear child, I don't care. I don't want you to be intimate with him. But you are not bound to be on intimate terms with a man because you dance with him at a ball. I don't mind your dancing with him. You surely did not think I was such a fool as to be jealous.

"Oh, no, I did not think that."

"Only be on your guard with him, so that people who know what he is may not think you are on very friendly terms. I must leave you here," he added, as they reached the shop. "I have a good deal to do for my father at the mills this morning."

Rose entered the shop, declaring to herself that George was the best and dearest fellow in the world, and that she was not half good enough for him; and registering a resolution to be very guarded in her manner to Mr. Wycherley.

Had she not better tell George about the tickets? He would not mind, if she told him exactly how it had come about. That is to say, he would not mind about her using them, at least she assured herself he would not; but he would mind her silent acquiescence in her mother's mistake; and in his blunt, straight-

forward way, would be sure to say,—"Why should you not have told her exactly what passed?" No, all things considered, she decided, after pondering a while, it would be better to say nothing about the matter. Her mother thought George had given her the tickets; he as evidently imagined her father had taken them for her. She had not said anything which was not strictly true, so she need not trouble herself about it.

She proceeded to do her shopping, therefore, with an easy conscience. She had had it impressed upon her from childhood that it was very wicked to tell lies. Her mother prided herself upon the care she had taken to impress upon her children the importance of truth; but in her moral code, falsehood ranked solely as a positive, never as a negative, and the possibility of falsehood by means of silence had never crossed her thoughts. So her daughter, not having committed herself to any absolutely false assertion, was quite satisfied that in the matter of truth she was wholly unimpeachable.

While Rose Playfair's fingers were busy with tarlatane and tulle, and her thoughts flitting between finery and romance,—now devising some wonderful trimming, and then manufacturing it amidst visions of a handsome and despairing lover held sternly in check by a virtuous though commiserating wife, she was herself much under discussion in the town. It is not to be supposed that the fact of her having met Mr. Wycherley at dinner at the Bullers' house would escape the Argus eyes of Monksford vigilance. Mrs. Buller's cook had a cousin who was housemaid to Mrs. Corbett, the

wine merchant's wife; so naturally Mrs. Corbett was in possession of the intelligence while as yet the enormity was only intended. She was a person who emphatically upheld at all times her neighbours' perfect right to do whatever they pleased, only arrogating to herself an equal right to hold and express with freedom her own opinion upon their doings.

"Of course it is no business of mine," she said to Mrs. Collier; "but, I must say, I cannot understand those Playfairs. To let that girl go and meet Mr. Wycherley in that way, after what passed upon the race course, seems to me most extraordinary!"

"The most extraordinary thing, I think, is, that George Huddlestone should put up with such doings."

"Oh, my dear, I don't suppose he knows anything about it. Men are not quick sighted about that sort of thing; and I always thought he was rather a sheep."

Mrs. Corbett had no daughters, and was by no means so sympathising towards George Huddlestone as were Mrs. Collier and other solicitous mothers.

"You may depend," put in Miss Witham, "that they are quite fools enough to hope her wax-doll face may catch Mr. Wycherley. They would throw George Huddlestone over in a moment if they could see a chance of entangling him. Well, Miss Tollmache may be very good-natured, but I certainly think she has done that silly girl an ill turn in taking so much notice of her. You may depend it is just that which has so turned the heads of the whole family, that they think she may even manage

to catch a county man. But what on earth can have taken Mr. Wycherley to dine at the Bullers'?"

"Oh, you may depend there's a deeper game going on than we see," said Mrs. Tatnell. "Mr. Wycherley was walking about the racecourse with Buller just before George Huddlestone left the stand. Then Mr. Wycherley went directly and carried on a barefaced flirtation with the girl; and now she goes to meet him at dinner at Bullers'. Something will come of it, you will see! Buller's a shrewd fellow, and I'll be bound he's making a desperate effort to push himself in some way among the county people, for he has lost caste terribly in the town. I must allow those Mosses are very clever. They're making good use of the Parkers and the drainage disturbance. Buller hasn't a chance of the churchwardenship."

"But how on earth can he have got hold of Mr. Wycherley?" asked Miss Witham, who, by right of social position, assumed to have a clearer perception than her neighbours of the great gulf fixed between county and town people.

"Ah, who shall say?" replied Mrs. Tatnell. "People say Mr. Wycherley is over head and ears in gambling debts, and Buller would not be particular, you may depend, as to the sort of services he rendered—." An ominous shake of the head left her hearers to fill up the picture of iniquity as they chose.

"Well, as I said, it's no business of mine," said Mrs. Corbett. "Still, I've a right to my own opinion, and I certainly have a strong one that the whole thing is discreditable, and that the Playfairs are either very designing, or most infatuated."

"I don't think there need be much doubt which it is," was Mrs. Tatnell's rejoinder; to which declaration the other ladies present signified their assent by sundry nods and murmured expressions of acquiescence.

Of course the first of the party who espied George Huddlestone bore down upon him with the fact, in the choice hope it might be news, and news of an unpleasant character to him. That fortunate person was Mrs. Corbett. But if George Huddlestone was a sheep, he was at least too astute a sheep to be worried by Mrs. Corbett. He received the intelligence with a smile.

"Did you know Miss Playfair had met Mr. Wycherley at the Bullers'?" Mrs. Corbett asked.

"I had not a chance to know. I only saw her for a few moments in the town this morning, and we had more interesting matters to talk about."

"Well, Mr. Huddlestone, I'm a plain-spoken woman, and though of course people have a right to please themselves, I must say I think the less Miss Playfair sees of Mr. Wycherley the better for her."

"I have no doubt her parents are quite able to take good care of her," he answered coldly, as he passed on. But nevertheless the shaft had gone home, and the anxious thoughts which sometimes clouded his happiness almost shaped themselves into actual dread. He was too straightforward, however, for prudent prying and spying. He went straight to the Playfairs.

"Why did you not tell me this morning, Rose, that you had met Mr. Wycherley at the Bullers'?"

"Because you went away just as I was going to do so," she answered, truly enough. "I did not go there on purpose to meet him, George. Mr. Buller only told me a gentleman was coming to dine with him, to discuss some business, and asked me to come, because it was dull for Mrs. Buller. He never said the gentleman was Mr. Wycherley."

George was perfectly satisfied. Suspicion was far from his nature; but so also was anything at all approaching a habit of analysing the sayings and doings of other people; and subtle phases of moral obliquity were far beyond his ken. A human being was to him either truthful, and therefore always to be trusted, or else untruthful, and always to be distrusted. He had no perception of the extent to which the two characteristics might coexist in the same person. And to suspect his little Rosebud of any covert disingenuousness would never have crossed his thoughts for a moment. His question, however, raised another question in Rose's mind.

"How did you hear I had dined at the Bullers', George? Did Mr. Buller tell you?"

"No; it was Mrs. Corbett."

"Mrs. Corbett! How did she know it?"

"Heaven knows! These people find out everything. She thinks it is very wrong that you should meet Mr. Wycherley."

"What business is it of hers?" Rose exclaimed, colouring with anger.

"None, my pet! That is probably the reason she concerns herself about the matter. But, you see now, dear child, how many eyes are watching you, so I know you will be cautious."

"I will, indeed, dear George!" and she raised her sweet face for a kiss, with something very like tears in her eyes. He was so good, and kind, and true; how could she fail to love him dearly: and she would be so careful. Still, she said nothing about the tickets.

The time slipped rapidly away; even the hours of the all-important day itself seemed to wing a speedier flight than that of ordinary hours, and Rose had some ado to get all her adornments duly prepared. In the afternoon came a beautiful bouquet, with a little note from George. He had not time to call during the day, but should see her at the ball. But she was not to keep any dances for him if she could get better partners.

"I know," he wrote, "it can be no great pleasure to such a good dancer as you, my pet, to dance with a clumsy blunderer like me; so only fall back on me failing better partners."

"Dear, darling, unselfish fellow!" she murmured to herself; and she kissed the note, and was turning the flowers about in great admiration, when Alice came running in, all excitement and wonder, with another beautiful bouquet in her hand.

"Oh, Rose, just look! here's another bouquet come for you. Such a beauty—who can it be from? A man brought it, and gave it to Sarah, and only just said, 'For Miss Playfair,' and went away directly. And there's something hard under the paper. What can it be?"

With flushed cheeks, Rose untwisted the paper wound round the flower stems. The "something hard" was a pretty filigree silver bouquet holder.

"Oh, Rose, how beautiful! Who can have sent it? It is much better than George's."

"No, it isn't?" she answered sharply.

"It is, though; and George's had no holder. This is best: you must take it, Rose. But I wonder who ever sent it?"

"How can I tell? But it is no matter. I shall of course take George's bouquet."

She carried them both up to her room, and looked at them from time to time as she worked. Who had sent the second bouquet? She knew well enough. What a pity both had come at the same time! it seemed such a waste. Of course she would take George's, but—. No, the other was not prettier; there was nothing to choose between them. There was only the bouquet-holder. Then a flash of mischievous merriment flitted over her face. She might put the holder on George's bouquet. But no! That would almost seem like a reproach to him for sending his without one. Yet, what a pity it was not to use the holder—such a pretty one! and it was really very kind of Mr. Wycherley to send the bouquet. George's was quite as good; but surely Mr. Wycherley's suited her dress best in point of colour? What a pity George had sent one that day! His might have come in so nicely some other time, when she had no chance of any other. And the holder! Ah, no doubt Mr. Wycherley had heard she was going to be married, and intended it as a little present. Poor fellow! that was very kind. It would seem very ungracious if she did not take it with her. How unfortunate it was! After all, there were more sweet-scented flowers in George's

bouquet. It seemed a shame to waste them. Would it not be better to put them in water, and have the enjoyment of them for some days, instead of taking them to wither in a hot, crowded ballroom? Well, she would think about it. She must do nothing that could possibly vex George—that was a settled point.

The point was settled when she came downstairs, dressed for the ball.

"Oh, Rose, how beautiful you look!" exclaimed Lucy, who had pleaded for leave to sit up, that she might see Rose dressed. And Rose was gracious to her little sister, and did not find her remarks unpleasant.

"And you've got the other bouquet, after all?" said Alice.

"Yes; I thought I had better take it. George's is really too beautiful to waste. They're such sweet-scented flowers; they will be delicious for a week in water, and the stalks are longer than these. They will keep much better. I shall tell George why I did it."

George was standing at the entrance to the town hall as they drove up. He waited for her at the door of the cloak-room, while she was duly shaken out and arranged, and she went upstairs with him and her father in high good humour. She liked the manner of her appearance. There was a sort of importance,—a semi-matrimonial freedom, in entering thus, in company with only two gentlemen, which was much less commonplace than following, like other girls, in the wake of a mamma. In the ante-room they paused, and while Doctor Playfair was

speaking to an acquaintance, there was a little explanation over the bouquet.

"It is not yours, George," she said, seeing that he was looking at it. "It was left just afterwards, with no message; and I thought I would like to keep yours in water, that I might make it last as long as possible, so I brought this one to wither here. You don't mind, do you, dear?"

"Well, I think I would have liked you to bring mine. But it is all right if you are pleased. But who can have sent that one?"

"There was no message."

"Perhaps it came from Maurice Collier!"

Maurice Collier was a much enamoured stripling of about Rose's own age, and she only laughed heartily at the suggestion. But she did not show him the holder.

"There's the first dance beginning. Oh, I have a card for you here. Do you want to dance this dance? Shall I hunt up poor Collier?"

"No. What nonsense. I don't care to dance just now. I would rather look on. I want to see the Duchess arrive."

"She won't come yet awhile. But if you sit here, you can command the entrance."

He found her a seat, and then she took a furtive glance down the card. The second waltz was "The Skylark." George also noted the fact.

"There's your favourite waltz, second, Rosebud. I hope you will get a good partner for that, my pet."

A pang of self-reproach, almost of terror, seized her. "Oh! George," she exclaimed almost involun-

tarily, "I wish you liked dancing, so that I might dance it with you."

"Much you would enjoy it, my darling. Never mind, pet. You won't care to dance with me after next spring."

She stood looking down at her card, to hide the tears which were almost brimming over, and wishing devoutly for the moment that she had not promised to dance with Mr. Wycherley. But then another dance began, and a partner claimed her, and with rapid motion her spirits rose again.

She danced one dance with George, and was very loving; and he thought, as he looked at her, that she was even prettier than he had ever deemed her. Then there was a stir and bustle, and a distant glimpse of a great glitter of diamonds warned her that the Duchess was entering the room, leaning on the arm of His Serene Highness, who had been paying visits in the neighbourhood, and had returned to Wyvern Abbey the previous day.

There was quite a commotion, of course, as the select group of Olympians threaded their way to the upper end of the room, where seats had been arranged for them; while a great following of the lesser gods and goddesses, who had been lingering about and waiting, came surging in after them, and the small fry began to feel themselves very small indeed—much honoured, of course, by the companionship, but not half so merry and comfortable as before.

Rose was eagerly watching the Duchess, absorbed in admiration of the quivering sparkles of light which seemed to flash and play all over her with every movement, when the band again struck up,

and the first notes of "The Skylark" fell upon her ear. Almost at the same instant a voice close by her side said softly—"The happy moment is come."

She turned with a start. Mr. Wycherley was beside her, looking all the admiration he really felt.

"Oome at once," he said. "Half the people are staring at the royal bore, so there are not a great many couples on the floor yet. We shall have time for a good turn or two before it gets crowded."

He led her forward, and passing his arm round her, started at once. Who shall describe her sensations? She was really, though she did not know it, a beautiful dancer; and now, for the first time in her life, she found herself dancing with a partner who was fully her equal, if not even her superior in the art. She forgot everything in the mere enjoyment of the motion. His clasp was so firm yet light, and every movement so steady and so true. She felt as if she was almost floating on the air.

"Oh, Mr. Wycherley," she naively exclaimed, when at length they paused for a moment, "how beautifully you waltz! I never felt anything like it before."

"Who would not waltz with such a partner?" he replied.

"I am sure I cannot dance anything like so well as you do!" she said.

"Are you a judge? I can only say that I have danced in almost every capital in Europe, but I never met with your equal as a waltzer. But come away again; it is pretty clear just now."

He had no mind to let her stand long, lest she should perceive what his quick eye had already

detected, that a great many eyes in the room were upon them. If she turned conscious, half the pleasure of the dance would be spoiled.

They might well attract all eyes. The dancing alone would have been enough to do that, without the charming contrast of her fair, delicately flushed face, golden hair, and slight girlish form, in the simple, pure white dress, against his black figure, surmounted by the handsome bronzed face, with the dark eyes and hair. On and on they went, and fewer and fewer became the other couples, until at last a sudden perception came over her that they were the only couple dancing, in the midst of a ring of lookers on.

"Oh, Mr. Wycherley, please stop!" she said. "No one else is dancing."

"So much the better," he replied, adroitly however bringing her to a stand near a convenient opening for retreat; "all the more room for us."

"Oh! but I don't like it. I had no idea no one else was dancing."

"They were better occupied."

He had no time to say more. George came up instantly, looking a little grave. "Your father has been sent for, Rose," he said. "I am to take you to Mrs. Daniels."

He and Mr. Wycherley looked at one another, as men do look under such circumstances; but as Rose instantly took his arm, her partner had nothing to do but retire.

"I had no idea every one had stopped dancing, George. Why did they?"

"They were all stopping to watch you."

"Oh, George!"

"It was a pretty sight, I must allow, my pet; but I could wish your partner had been some one else."

"But you said you did not mind my dancing with him."

"No more I do. But I had rather he had not made you quite so conspicuous. Though that was not his fault. He is a magnificent dancer certainly."

A host of partners were ready to besiege her, but she would not dance the next dance. She sat down beside Mrs. Daniels, feeling a trifle perturbed, although secretly triumphant in the consciousness of being an object of envy to all her acquaintance. She thought Mrs. Daniels received her a shade coldly, so she turned away to watch the Olympians; and very soon she saw there was a little stir among them; something evidently going on. She saw the Prince speak to the Duchess, who looked a trifle perplexed, and rose from her seat and crossed the room to where the Duke was standing talking to Mrs. Pendennis. She drew him aside, and spoke a few words to him; the Duke also looked a little perplexed, and went and spoke to the Prince, and for a moment she almost fancied they looked towards her. Then the Duke spoke to one of his sons, and he laughed, and went out of the room. In a few moments he came back, arm in arm with Mr. Wycherley, and they were both laughing at something. Mr. Wycherley went up and spoke to the Prince and the Duke, and she thought the Prince spoke a little peremptorily, and the Duke and Mr. Wycherley looked with an odd look at one another. Then the Duchess, who had returned to

her seat, said something to the Prince, who replied with evident sharpness, and the Duke and Mr. Wycherley simultaneously shrugged their shoulders slightly, and turning away, walked down the room together.

They came straight towards her. Rose glanced at the Duchess. She had put up her glass, and was certainly looking at her. Gracious Heaven! what was going to happen? Her heart began to beat violently. In another moment Mr. Wycherley was standing before her, looking all gravity and deference.

"Miss Playfair, the Duke of Bermondsey wishes me to introduce him."

Rose got up from her seat, blushing deeply, in such evidently genuine confusion and embarrassment, that the Duchess, still watching through her glass, murmured to herself, "Really a pretty unaffected little creature."

The Duke returned Rose's timid nervous salutation with almost paternal kindliness of manner. "I am very happy," he said, "to make the acquaintance of—an old man may venture to say it, Miss Playfair —the prettiest girl in the room."

"Oh, your Grace is very kind," she faltered.

"At the present moment, however," he continued, smiling a little, "I am not acting solely from inclination. The Prince desires me to express to you his wish to dance the next quadrille with you."

"Oh no, your Grace! I really couldn't," Rose exclaimed, terrified into volubility. "Please ask him to excuse me. I should be so frightened."

"My dear young lady, there is nothing to be

frightened at, save the horrible jargon which he imagines to be English."

"Oh, but please ask him to excuse me."

"I fear I must not do that. Royalty is privileged, you know. You really will not find it so formidable as you fear. Let me give you my arm."

There was just a tinge of authority mingled with the kindliness of his manner, which awed her into submission. In another moment Rose Playfair, in a state of trepidation which prevented her even from perceiving that every eye present was fixed upon her, was walking up the room, with her hand resting on the Duke of Bermondsey's arm.

Then there was a hiatus in her recollections. She had a vague remembrance of hearing the Duke mention her name to a dark foreign-looking man, who bowed, and said something which she did not understand, and of Mr. Wycherley speaking a few words to him in German, at which she thought he smiled; and then of finding herself standing beside him, at the top of the quadrille. But all was vague and confused, until, as she stood trembling and speechless, a few words from behind caught her ear, which was naturally a sharp one.

"Merciful powers, Duchess, what is all this?"

"Oh, my dear, the most extraordinary thing. He insisted, in spite of all we could say, on her being introduced. She waltzed with Mr. Wycherley. She certainly waltzes well, and Mr. Wycherley, as you know, dances divinely. It was really a pretty sight. He was quite taken with her as he watched them, and would have it he would dance a quadrille with her."

"Artful little puss, she has been making eyes at him, I suppose."

"Oh, no, I think not. She seems a pretty, simple little thing. I really don't think it is any fault of hers."

"Who is she?"

"Some doctor's daughter, I believe, in the town. It is very stupid and unfortunate; but he is so obstinate, there is no moving him when he takes a thing into his head."

This little colloquy stung Rose into defiance. These people looked down upon her. They were jealous of her—all these women. She would show them that she could hold her own among them all. She threw back her head a little, and looking fearlessly up, replied to some remark from her royal partner, which was fortunately intelligible, with such a glance and smile, that it raised quite a flutter in the susceptible princely bosom. Then glancing round, she noted how she was holding the chief position in a most Olympian group; and how outside the charmed circle, all Monksford was gazing with wonder-stricken eyes. A sense of triumph stole over her which banished all timidity. She smiled brightly on Kate Tollmache, who, secretly much amused, nodded to her from the next set; and quite regardless of the supercilious glances rained freely upon her, went through the quadrille with perfect ease and self-possession.

She caught one or two very speaking glances from Mr. Wycherley, who was leaning against a pillar hard by, looking on; and then she noticed Miss Tollmache, in a pause of the dance, step back

and say a few words to her father, who nodded and looked across at herself. When the quadrille was over, she saw Mr. Wycherley making his way toward her; but before he could reach her, Mr. Tollmache came up and said,—

"Allow me to take you back to your friends, Miss Playfair."

Rose took his arm. Mr. Wycherley fell back; the Prince bowed, with a most sentimental look; and in another moment she was descending the momentarily won heights of Olympus, pursued by many depreciatory or acrimonious glances, to mingle once more among the common herd of human beings.

In a short time Mr. Wycherley came up to her again. "May I hope for the next waltz?" he said. "Just one more taste of dancing as it should be. We are all going shortly."

Rose hesitated. "I did not mean to dance it," she said; "that is such a horrid waltz."

"Ah, but it is changed! I have danced your favourite waltz with you; now I want you to dance my favourite with me. Will you not?"

Of course she did, and thought the waltz more charming than the "Skylark." When they came to a pause he said,—

"You have made a conquest to-night, Miss Playfair."

"Have I?" she asked.

"Indeed you have. I have met His Serene Highness a dozen times at balls in Paris or Vienna, but I never saw him dance before. All the women up there are ready to tear you to pieces."

"What will they say to you, then?"

"Whatever they like. I am not given at any time to attending to feminine chatter, and it would certainly be something very deadly which I should hesitate to face, in order to secure so much pleasure as I have enjoyed to-night."

The tone in which the words were spoken seemed to give them a meaning somewhat beyond that of mere passing compliment. Rose felt a trifle disconcerted, and looked down at her bouquet in silence.

"Do you like it?" he asked, softly.

"Oh, very much, and the beautiful holder! You should not have sent that."

"A mere trifle," he answered carelessly, "not worth your acceptance. But neither Monksford nor Willesbury could produce anything better. Shall we take another turn?"

A few more rounds brought the waltz to a close. "I am going directly," he said, as he took her back to her seat; "when shall I have a chance of seeing you again?"

"I don't know, I am sure."

"I shall be leaving the neighbourhood very shortly. Take a stroll through Catherton Wood on Sunday afternoon, and let me have the chance of saying good-bye."

"Oh, no! I dare not do that!"

"Why not?" And then he played his trump card. "I hear you are to be married in the spring, so when next I come here, I shall hope to be allowed to call upon you, and make the acquaintance of the luckiest man in this county. Let me wish a friendly good-bye to Miss Playfair ere I

venture to lay my most respectful homage at the feet of Mrs. George Huddlestone."

"I cannot promise," she said hastily, as she saw George approaching.

"Certainly not. I shall be there on the chance, about three o'clock. Good-night, Miss Playfair," he added, as George came up. "I congratulate you on not having lived two hundred years ago. You would certainly have been burnt as a witch. The mere fact of your having induced His Serene Highness to dance, would have been held to prove to demonstration your use of diabolical arts."

He turned away with a profoundly deferential salutation, and joined the already dispersing throng of Olympians.

"Your father has come back, Rose," George said. "He is talking to my father in the ante-room. He wants to go home; so if you care to stay longer, you must stay with Mrs. Daniels, and I will wait for you and take you home when she goes."

"I do not care to stay longer," replied Rose, to whom the ball had suddenly become a very tame, common-place sort of affair. I have had plenty of dancing. I am quite ready to go home."

"Very well. Come and wait a little in the ante-room. You had better give all the swells a wide berth. Let them clear out of the cloak-room before you go down."

"Why?"

"Because," he answered, laughing, "you have made them all furious. You will be stabbed by a thousand double-edged glances if you go down just now."

"I could not help it. I did not want to dance with the Prince, but the Duke said I must not refuse."

"Of course not. But that fact will not make them forgive you a whit more easily."

In the course of another quarter of an hour Rose was on her way home, listening with a sparkling smile to her delighted father's rallying on the great conquest she had made.

CHAPTER XX.

THE POISON OF ASPS.

WHO shall describe how tongues ran riot in Monksford next day? Only the quill of some ravenous bird of prey, dipped in the venom of serpents, could graphically portray the tone and temper of conversation in the town. Every fresh enormity of Rose Playfair's seemed more heinous than that which had gone before it. She had fairly established her claim to be considered the prettiest girl in the town. She had secured an entrance on terms of intimacy at Wycherley Court. She had carried off the best match in the neighbourhood; and she had won the admiration and made the acquaintance of Mr. Wycherley. But her last great crime seemed to throw into the shade all which had gone before it. She had been twice chosen as partner by the most splendid dancer ever seen in Monksford, becoming thereby the centre of attraction at the county ball; and she had stood among the gods and goddesses, with a royal partner by her side!

"I really couldn't have believed it if I hadn't

seen it," Mrs. Moss said to Miss Bradley, after an excited recital of the occurrences of the previous evening. "And however George Huddlestone could stand there, and watch her whirling about with that disreputable Frenchman, is more than I can understand. I know my girls should have sat out the whole evening before I'd have let them dance with him. And then to see her strutting up the room, as bold as brass, with the Duke. I could see how annoyed he was at having to do it, although, of course, he's quite a gentleman, and made no show of it; and then standing up there, with the Prince beside her, looking about to see who was noticing her. She's a downright pert little minx; that's what she is!"

"But she couldn't help all that," suggested Miss Bradley, who, since Rose's engagement to George Huddlestone, had become much more lenient towards her shortcomings than heretofore.

"Couldn't she?" snarled Mrs. Moss. "I was there, Miss Bradley, and you were not. I could see her making eyes at them under the rose."

Mrs. Corbett announced her opinion in one trenchant sentence, delivered with the portentous emphasis of a whole volume of unexpressed meaning.

"Of course they have a right to do as they please. But it's my opinion that the sooner that girl is married the better, at least for *her*."

"I suppose there'll be no such thing as speaking to her now after dancing with a Prince," Mrs. Tatnell rejoined; "but to my thinking, her going on that way with Mr. Wycherley is worse."

"Oh, no, I cannot agree with you there, Mrs.

Tatnell," put in Miss Witham, with the condescending urbanity of conscious superiority. "I can assure you that, in high circles, any attention from royal personages is held to be very compromising to a girl. When the Hereditary Grand Duke of Pumpernickel was in this country, he was very much taken with my cousin, the admiral's second daughter, a very lovely girl. Indeed, if they would have consented to a morganatic marriage, she might unquestionably have been now his wife; but my cousins were much annoyed, and sent her away to stay with some friends in the country, to avoid his attentions, because they considered them to be very damaging to her. Of course, it is not of much consequence to a girl in Rose Playfair's position, but it is certainly nothing to boast of."

"Well, I think Miss Witham, I am rather inclined to agree with Mrs. Tatnell," said Mrs. Collier, almost at the exploding point, from the pressure of secret information; "and so I think will you be when I tell you all I know. Fanny has often heard Rose say 'The Skylark' was her favourite waltz: and every one must have noticed that the *second* time she danced with Mr. Wycherley, the waltz had been changed. Mr. Collier noticed it, and he went and asked the bandmaster why it was. He said Mr. Wycherley had begged him, as a personal favour, to substitute the one that was played. If those are not tolerably significant facts, I don't know what are."

The logical sequence of this discovery of tactics on the part of Mr. Wycherley, was naturally a fresh outburst of indignation against the offending Rose Playfair. It is poor satisfaction to squirt feeble

jets of venom at a wholly inaccessible foe; far otherwise in the case of an easily reached victim. In the midst of the uproar, Miss Witham rose to leave.

"Oh, don't go, Miss Witham," said Mrs. Corbett. "Tea is just coming."

"Not to-day, thank you. I have other engagements."

"Where on earth can she be going?" thought Mrs. Tatnell, "leaving just as tea is coming." And she forthwith rose and followed, in order to find out, if possible, Miss Witham's destination, and enjoy a little private discussion with her over the interesting subjects which were under consideration.

"Are you going home, Miss Witham?" she asked, overtaking her a few yards away from Mrs. Corbett's door.

"Oh no, not at present. Indeed," she continued, in a tone indicative of lofty rectitude, of purpose, "I have quite determined to go at once to the Playfairs. They ought to be warned of what will be the result of this preposterous folly. It is only right that some one should do it."

"I doubt you'll get but small thanks."

"Very probable, Mrs. Tatnell; but that is quite a secondary consideration. It is of course an unpleasant task, especially where one cannot hope to be met in the same spirit of Christian kindness which prompts one's actions. But I feel it is to be a duty, and I hope I shall never be found shrinking from a manifest duty, however painful its performance may be."

"I am sure, Miss Witham, your conduct does you

honour. I only wish I could accompany you, and aid you in so painful a task. But since those Playfairs chose to spread snch abominable and scandalous insinuations against my late dear husband's conduct about the practice, when every one knows him to have been the very soul of honour, I have felt it right entirely to give up visiting them. I hope you may be able to do some good, Miss Witham; but I confess I am very doubtful. I hope I am not uncharitable, but I must admit I can believe anything of people who are capable of slandering their neighbours' characters."

"I shall at least have the approval of my own conscience," replied Miss Witham majestically.

"And perhaps you will call at my house, and take a cup of tea afterwards. I shall be anxious to hear whether you have been able to do any good."

Miss Witham promised, and they parted. She dauntlessly to face every foe in the performance of her duty; Mrs. Tatnell to prepare consolation in the shape of tea and sympathy, in case of severe handling.

It had been a morning of unalloyed triumph in the Playfair establishment. "Now mind, papa," Rose had said, as they reached home the previous night, "you are not to tell mamma what has happened if she is awake. You are only just to say I enjoyed the ball very much, and leave me to tell them all in the morning."

Doctor Playfair promised, but needlessly. His wife was sleeping soundly. He lay awake for some time, himself thinking over the events of the evening; and for the first time beginning to ques-

tion whether they had been quite wise in giving such ready acceptance to George Huddlestone's addresses. His pretty Rose! how beautiful she had looked that evening. No parental partiality could be misleading him upon that point, when the admiration she had excited had been manifested in so startling a manner. They had certainly rather under-rated than over-rated her beauty at home. What might it not have secured for her? Perhaps one of the county men! And what a chance that would have given for the younger girls. Alice and Lucy both promised to be very pretty, and he was not sure little Edith would not beat them all in time. And then the boys! three boys to start in the world. How much a wealthy well-born brother-in-law might have done! Well, it was too late to think about it now. George was rich, unimpeachable in character, very kind, and highly respected, so, after all, it was perhaps as well to be satisfied. And with that highly creditable conclusion, he fell asleep.

Rose slept but little. She did not know until she found herself alone in her own room how much excited she was. She had so much to think of, she could think steadily of nothing. It was all a whirl of enchanting reminiscence, slightly malicious exultation, and exciting anticipation. That half indefinite tryst with Mr. Wycherley naturally occupied much of her thoughts. Of course she was by no means certain she should go, but of one thing she was very glad. As he knew of her engagement to George, he would of course understand that her feelings for himself could be only those of friendship.

How adroitly he had contrived to convey to her the knowledge that he expected nothing from her which was not quite consistent with her position, whatever his own feelings might be! Ah, poor fellow! and she sighed heavily. It was all very well for girls to wish for admiration, common-place or plain girls, like Fanny Collier, and the Mosses, and Robertses; but little did they know how much that was painful came in its train. How sad it was to have to wound where you would fain give happiness, and to feel that in lifting one man to the very summit of bliss, you hurled another down into the depths of despair.

At last she fell into a feverish sleep, filled with dreams in which the Prince, the Duchess's diamonds, Mr. Wycherley, and the envious gaze of all Monksford, were mixed up in wild confusion; and she woke with a start at hearing Edith calling out on the stairs that breakfast was ready.

She was soon dressed and downstairs, and then came the astounding revelation, which filled her delighted listeners with excited astonishment. They did not think much of her dancing with Mr. Wycherley. On these occasions, as has been stated, the Olympians were wont to relax somewhat. But to be introduced to the Duke of Bermondsey! and he chosen by a Prince as his partner! It was hardly possible to credit that it was really true.

"I do believe you're fooling us, Rose," Alice said. "You don't really mean that you danced with the Prince?"

"It's no fooling," interposed Doctor Playfair decidedly; "but a simple fact."

That settled the question, and they could only talk and wonder. But Mrs. Playfair's thoughts were busy, and they swept far ahead of her husband's wavering mental suggestions, to the length of a positive and defined regret that Rose had accepted George Huddlestone. At any rate, *if* it were too late—and she inwardly emphasised the "if" strongly —to make any change, George must at least be made to feel that things were not quite as they had been. An opportunity of effecting this necessary operation soon presented itself. George came in just as breakfast was finished, to see how Rose was after the ball.

Rose received him lovingly enough. She was in that state of high satisfaction and good humour which gives an inclination to universal geniality. But Mrs. Playfair assumed a somewhat patronising air, tinged with a shade of dignified reserve. She began to question him about the house. She had walked round that way the previous day, and was not quite satisfied. She could wish the situation had been different. If it had been a little nearer the Court it would have been pleasant for Rose, being so intimate there. And was not the dining-room a little small for dinner parties? And was George quite sure it would be dry enough for Rose to go into it next summer? She could not for a moment allow her to go into the house until it was perfectly dry,—Rose was so apt to take cold.

George smiled a little to himself; he saw through it, although he was not in general very keen-sighted. But though he smiled, he was not entirely at his ease. The occurrences of the preceding night had

excited some uneasy sensations within his breast. Mr. Wycherley, having become aware of the engagement, had been sufficiently cautious, so he had seen nothing to arouse any alarm; but he had heard one or two remarks he did not quite like. And then, that dance with the Prince! Rose was too young and inexperienced—that was how he put it to himself—to be thus suddenly brought into prominence, without danger of her mental balance being a trifle disturbed; and he most devoutly wished His Serene Highness had stayed away, or reserved his attentions for less unsophisticated beauties. Still, his uneasiness was soothed by Rose's manner, and he left the house somewhat reassured.

Mrs. Playfair went out immediately after breakfast, to attend to those household requirements which are so heavy a responsibility where incomes are but small, and which in general weighed upon her as a most harassing burden. But this morning she felt herself lifted completely above all such mundane considerations. She issued her orders with an air of lofty independence; and meeting Miss Bradley, who was as yet ignorant of the astounding events of the previous night, greeted her with an amount of condescension in her manner which rather astonished that good lady.

"How did Rose enjoy the ball last night?" she asked.

"Oh, very much indeed. A ball is always pleasant to her—more pleasant than good for her, I sometimes fear. She is so much admired, that she is always overwhelmed with partners; and has really to dance almost more than she has strength for."

"Well, I suppose it will soon be over now."

"I don't know. Of course, as a married woman, she will be more independent about dancing, but then she will have her own balls and parties to arrange, and that is very fatiguing; but Rose has a good spirit. I shall insist upon her not walking much after she is married, but always riding or driving, and that will save her a good deal, and give her more chance to meet the claims of society."

She did not enlighten Miss Bradley any further. She was not going to allow it to appear as though she considered the honours conferred upon her daughter as anything save what was quite natural.

It was upon this scene of exuberant family exultation that Miss Witham bore down in all the moral grandeur of her unflinching determination to do her duty at any cost. Mrs. Playfair's greeting was quite sufficient to convince her, had any such convincing been necessary, how urgent was the need for this matter to be put before the family in the true light. There was in it much of that same condescension which had surprised Miss Bradley, and of the cause of which she had soon been made aware.

"How is Rose?" Miss Witham asked, preparing for action, after a little preliminary settling down.

"Quite well, thank you! She is gone to the Court to wish Miss Tollmache good-bye. The Tollmaches are going to Wales for some time, to-morrow. Rose will miss them very much—she is so intimate at the Court."

"I hear the ball last night was a great success."

"So it seems. Rose enjoyed it very much. She could do nothing but talk about the Duchess's dia-

monds this morning. I suppose they are very fine."

"Oh, they are world-renowned," replied Miss Witham. "Not, of course, the ones she would wear here; they would only be some of the smaller ones, though doubtless they would seem very splendid to Rose. But to see the Duchess in all the Bermondsey diamonds, in London, is indeed a sight."

It was one Miss Witham had never seen; but that did not matter. The thrust would answer quite as well, to take down the intolerable conceit of these Playfairs. But Mrs. Playfair's smile warned her, before an answer came, that her shaft had gone astray.

"You are quite mistaken. Of course, a mere child like Rose has had little chance to see half the quantity of jewellery which women of your and my age have seen. But Mr. Wycherley told her that the diamond coronet which the Duchess wore last night was the very gem of all the Bermondsey collection; and he said that, taking them altogether, he thought he had never seen a more splendid display of diamonds in his life. I suppose you will allow that he is a good judge?"

To describe how powerful an incentive this speech was to Miss Witham's sense of Christian duty is needless.

"Indeed," she replied, "I should have thought the Duchess would have shown better taste than to make such a display in a quiet country place. Of course Mr. Wycherley would know. I was sorry, altogether, to hear of the occurrences of the evening."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Playfair, scenting the breath of coming war. "I was not aware that anything unfortunate had occurred."

"I fear, Mrs. Playfair, that is because you are ignorant of the general feeling in the town. I imagined that that would probably be the case, and felt it to be only right to let you know what is being said."

"Really, Miss Witham, I don't understand you. There's never any want of ill-natured talk in this place, or in any place, for the matter of that. But I can't imagine what there can be to say about the ball that need make any one feel sorry."

"I suppose you know that the Prince asked Rose to dance a quadrille with him?"

"Certainly. But I don't see what there is to be surprised at in that. I don't suppose any one will dispute that Rose was the prettiest girl at the ball!"

"I am afraid, Mrs. Playfair, you are not fully aware of the feeling of good society on such points. Attentions from royal personages to young ladies in a less exalted position are always held to be very compromising, and to lay a girl open to very unpleasant remarks."

"Then, Miss Witham, we must congratulate ourselves that we are not in what you call 'good society,' and haven't such bad thoughts."

"You are quite wrong. My cousin, the Admiral's wife, is one of the sweetest, purest-minded women I ever met; but she sent her daughter away the moment it became apparent how much the Hereditary Grand Duke of Pumpernickel admired her."

"Very well. And if your cousin, the Admiral's

wife, could not trust her daughter, I think she did the wisest thing possible. I am more fortunate. My Rose will not have her head turned because a Prince admires her. She is so accustomed to admiration, dear child!"

"I see you do not understand," retorted Miss Witham, colouring up, as she felt she was not exactly getting the best of it. "Perhaps that is natural. I was foolish to cite an example from such a totally different sphere of life. But you force me to tell you candidly, Mrs. Playfair, that very unpleasant things are being said about Rose. Her dancing with the Prince, though much commented upon, was—well, might or might not be the result of any action on her own part. But I can assure you her name is coupled with Mr. Wycherley's in a way which must, I think, be very unpleasant to Mr. George Huddlestone. She is very young, and I fear she has been a little incautious. I can tell you, as a fact, that bets are being taken in the town upon the chance of her marriage ever coming off."

This statement had about as much truth in it as such statements generally have. Maurice Collier having remarked in Miss Witham's hearing that he'd bet two to one that marriage never came off.

"And I can tell you, Miss Witham," replied Mrs. Playfair, in a sharp, angry voice, "that neither we nor George Huddlestone are likely to trouble ourselves about the miserable gossip of this place. Of course, all the girls in the town, and their mothers too, for the matter of that, are jealous of Rose being so pretty and so much admired. They always have

been—small wonder, such a plain lot of girls as most of them are! and they're not likely to be any the less so, now the Prince has paid her such a compliment. But we, and George too, know well enough to what to lay all this ill-natured slanderous chatter. And if I didn't believe that George knows he's a lucky fellow to get the sweetest, prettiest girl in the town for his wife, I'd very soon let him know he'd best stand aside, and make way for better matches than ever he'll be."

Miss Witham got up from her seat. "Well, Mrs. Playfair, I can only say I am very sorry you take the matter in this light. I felt it to be only my duty to warn you of the impression existing in the town. I fear, if things go on as they are doing, that Rose will find, after her marriage, that many people will be a little shy of her. A pretty girl needs to be cautious; a pretty young wife still more so."

"Rose would be much obliged for your friendly counsels, if she heard them, I am sure," replied the angry mother, with a feeble attempt at sarcasm. "But I don't think, when she is married, she will trouble the town much for acquaintance, being, as I may say, quite among the county families already. We, of course, are not rich enough for such society, but it will be quite different then for Rose; so I hope none of the town people, who don't wish for her acquaintance, will take the trouble to call upon her. I don't suppose she'll notice much whether they do or not."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Playfair," said Miss Witham, concealing under an air of dignified reserve her inability

to find a reply to this audacious speech. "We had better say no more on this subject."

"Good-bye, Miss Witham; and I must say I quite agree with you, and can only wonder anything ever was said about it at all."

After this encounter Miss Witham found Mrs. Tatnell's tea and sympathy very consolatory,—the former refreshing to her somewhat excited physical state; the latter sweetly soothing to her lacerated feelings of Christian kindliness towards a family who, her own high moral standard compelled her to believe, were collectively pursuing a very uncomfortable road.

By the time Rose returned from her farewell visit to Miss Tollmache, Mrs. Playfair had cooled down a little; and though still sore and angry at the gossip she affected to despise, was secretly half consoled by triumph at the evident token she had received of the amount of envy excited by the distinction so unexpectedly awarded to her pretty daughter. Great, therefore, was her surprise when her recital to Rose of all that had passed was suddenly interrupted by the girl bursting into tears, and continuing to sob violently, in spite of all efforts at consolation.

"My gracious, child," she said, "what is the matter? You surely don't care for all their chatter. I'm sure I'd never have told you if I'd thought you'd mind. There, there, you're tired and over excited, my dear. Go and lie down for a bit, till tea is ready, and then you'll feel better."

Rose retired, willingly enough, and lay sobbing on her bed, vowing to herself, again and again, that

nothing should induce her to go and meet Mr. Wycherley on Sunday afternoon. She had come back from her visit to the Court in a somewhat subdued state of mind. Miss Tollmache had joked her a little about the Prince, but had avoided all mention of Mr. Wycherley; and when they parted, had wished her good-bye with a faint shade of anxious solicitude in her manner. At least Rose fancied so, and wished she had spoken out, that she might have had a chance to undo any false impression her former petulance might have produced. But Miss Tollmache said nothing; and she had not had courage to introduce the subject herself. Her mother's recital put the finishing touch to her uncomfortable frame of mind, and hence produced such unexpected results.

Could Rose Playfair have seen the workings of Mr. Wycherley's mind at that moment, her wise resolutions would have been strongly confirmed. He avowed to himself that he was, to use his own phraseology, "tremendously in love;" which being interpreted, means that he was strongly possessed by those sentiments which in men of his stamp take the place of the pure glow of that holy flame which could certainly find no fuel on which to feed itself amid the husks and garbage on which it is their pleasure to nourish the moral part of their being. From the date of his childish remembrances of his vain frivolous mother, and her dissipated or worse acquaintances, on to the present moment, his memory could bring before him no such portrait of fresh simple girlish beauty as that with which he was now brought in contact. Such contact was

quite a new sensation, and proportionally fascinating. He had seen many subtle representations of simple graces in his day; but now he had watched the genuine product, and was smitten with the most profound admiration for that which he was bent upon losing no chance of destroying. Leave the neighbourhood! Not he, so long as it offered such inducements to remain.

He had a business appointment with Mr. Octavius Buller for the day but one after the ball, on which occasion he was to sign certain papers, and go through certain formularies, whereby the heart of the industrious and sorely-maligned Mr. Buller was to be made glad, by feeling that his present social depreciation in Monksford was counter-balanced by the acquisition of his first distinct hold upon the Wycherley estates.

Another bottle of *the* sherry celebrated the occasion. It was worth it—worth a dozen, Mr. Buller thought, with a mental sneer at the fools who gave first-rate wine to any friend who chanced upon them at dinner time, and never recognised its importance as a factor in business of a certain kind. He and Mr. Wycherley parted in high good humour—he with valuable papers connected with the estate in his possession, and his client with a considerably increased income.

Mr. Wycherley strolled up and down the High Street,—bought some gloves in one shop, some handkerchiefs in another—asked where he could get impossible purchases, and wandered from place to place in search of them, setting thereby the whole of Monksford in a ferment of spying and speculation. At length

his laudable perseverance was crowned by success. He espied Rose Playfair in the distance, in company with some one whom he rightly concluded to be her mother, and at once bore down upon them.

Rose had recovered her wonted spirits after a good night's rest, and recalling to her mind those remarks of Mr. Wycherley's, which so distinctly showed that he intended his devotion to be of the most respectful nature. She was still satisfied that it would be more prudent not to take that walk on Sunday afternoon, but not so fiercely determined upon the point as she had been over night.

She found her mother in high good humour when she came down to breakfast.

"Look, Rose," she exclaimed, the moment her daughter appeared, "what your Uncle Fred has sent to buy some of your things. Now I shall really be able to get you some handsome dresses. I am so glad. What a dear kind-hearted fellow Fred is."

Fred was Mrs. Playfair's only brother, who had succeeded his father in the possession of the hotel before mentioned. Mrs. Playfair, anxiously conscious of the gulf fixed between mere business people and professional people, was not wont to encourage much intimacy with her jovial good-natured brother; but he had been very fond of Rose when almost an infant, and now enclosed a fifty-pound bank note, with his best love to Rose. Mrs. Playfair's sense of professional superiority did not at all prevent her from joyfully welcoming this substantial consolation for the misfortune of having relations in business.

"Now, my dear, I can get you one or two really

nice dresses at once. You will be so much noticed after what has happened, that I should like you to be very well dressed this winter; and we can get some dresses which will do for you to wear after you are married. There is nothing more vulgar than for a bride to appear always with everything new."

On this errand they had sallied forth accordingly, and Mrs. Playfair was condescending, and very fastidious. This material was not good enough, and that would not suit Miss Playfair's figure and complexion. She was really afraid she would have to send to London for what she wanted.

"You had better enter these things to me," she said with dignity, when at last her choice was made. "Miss Playfair will want may things before long; they had better all be entered and paid for at once."

She walked majestically out of the shop. Who would grudge her her little triumph in one where she had been used to see costly fabrics swept aside when she appeared at the counter, as manifestly useless, and common articles brought forward and ostentatiously recommended on the score of their exceeding cheapness?

It was just at this moment that Mr. Wycherley caught sight of them, and meeting them full, saluted Rose with the utmost gravity.

"May I venture to ask how you are after the ball, Miss Playfair?" he said, with a significant look at her mother. "I hope you were not very tired?"

"Oh no, not at all. Mr. Wycherley,—mamma."

"I am delighted," he said, with a very winning smile, "to have the pleasure of making acquaintance

with a lady who has the happiness of being mother to the queen of the ball."

Mrs. Playfair was quite in a little flutter. Delight at being thus seen by the Argus eyes of Monksford chatting in quite a friendly way with one of the county gentlemen—and "such an elegant-looking man"—being mixed with perturbing regrets that she and Rose had not on their best things.

"I am sure I am very happy," she said, "and you are very kind to speak so of Rose. Of course, I was very much pleased to hear what an honour had been paid to her; but I think she had to thank you for it."

"I? What on earth had I to do with it?"

"Well, some people say it was Mr. Wycherley's beautiful dancing which drew so much attention to Rose."

"People generally talk a great deal of nonsense," he replied. "But who would not dance with such an incentive? I have shifted my quarters, Miss Playfair. Eaglescliff was endurable no longer. Your triumph has rendered the atmosphere there so combustible, that I forthwith fled to Ripley Lodge, where, I am thankful to say, there is an absolute dearth of elderly young ladies."

"I thought you were going to leave the neighbourhood soon," she said, smiling a little at his words.

"So I am. I hope I shall see you again, however, before then."

The words were accompanied by a momentary beseeching glance, not lost upon Rose, and she coloured a little. A whole torrent of tumultuous

ideas had been rushing into Mrs. Playfair's brain during this brief colloquy; and feeling the case to be one which called for her own interference, she interposed before Rose had time to reply.

"I am sure, Mr. Wycherley, if you would drop us a line, any day that you are likely to be in Monksford, we should be delighted if you would take a quiet dinner with us. Doctor Playfair would be so pleased to make your acquaintance."

Rose's slight flush turned to a vivid crimson as this unexpected invitation called up before her imagination a vision of all which the utmost taxing of home resources could achieve, as contrasted with the daily routine of that life of which she had had a glimpse in her occasional visits to the Court; and she listened with positive dread for Mr. Wycherley's reply. Not a trace was visible on his countenance of the internal shudder the suggestion called up, as he replied—

"You are very kind. Nothing would give me greater pleasure, should a chance occur. I shall not hesitate to avail myself of your offer, if I have an opportunity."

"I am sure it is you who are kind!" replied Mrs. Playfair, growing quite enthusiastic. "We shall feel ourselves quite honoured; and be sure you give us as long notice as possible, for you know a doctor's time is not his own."

"I will not fail to do so," he replied; and with another eloquent glance at Rose, he raised his hat and turned away.

Rose expected a torrent of eulogium as they pursued their way home; but somewhat to her surprise—

certainly much to her relief—her mother was silent. Mrs. Playfair was indeed occupied with thoughts to which it was not exactly convenient to give utterance. A vast amount of cogitation, speculation, and castle-building flitted rapidly through her brain, beginning in a rapid summing-up of all her available resources in the way of plate, linen, and attendance, in case of a dinner party, and ending in a settled resolution, that if Rose, at her age, had made a mistake respecting her future destiny, there was no reason why she should be forced to abide by that mistake, should greater worldly experience alter her feelings.

Rose's own thoughts were busy with the coming Sunday afternoon. She did not at all intend to go to Catherton Wood; still she could not help feeling very sorry for Mr. Wycherley. He had looked so beseechingly at her; and after all, as he knew all about her intended marriage, and therefore could in no way misunderstand her conduct, she was perhaps erring on the side of too great strictness. Still, that was better than the reverse; and she felt very virtuous as she reiterated to herself that, of course, she would not go to Catherton Wood.

George came in during the evening, and Rose could not but observe that her mother's manner towards him was a shade less cordial than usual; and when, after a loving whispering and embracing at the front door on his departure, she returned to the dining-room to wish her mother good-night, Mrs. Playfair, after kissing her with much demonstration, said with a sigh,—

"Oh! my dear child, George is a dear, good fellow,

but I do wish he was a little more polished! How proud I should be to see my beautiful Rose the bride of some such handsome, gentleman-like man as—as —well, as Mr. Wycherley!"

Rose flashed out suddenly—"Mamma, don't say such things. George is worth a dozen of such men, and I love him very much."

"My dear, don't fly into a passion! I know George is good and kind, and very well off; still he is not very polished. I was only wishing he had the recommendation of personal appearance added to his many good qualities."

"He is very well as he is," Rose shortly answered, as she left the room.

CHAPTER XXI.

MRS. PLAYFAIR IN A NEW CHARACTER.

FROM his convenient bow window, Mr. Octavius Buller had been a witness of that meeting between the Playfairs and Mr. Wycherley in the High Street, and had watched the short conversation with much interest and high satisfaction. He had been at the ball. He made a point of showing himself on these occasions, keeping somewhat in the background, save when he had a chance to say a passing word to Sir Myles Jarvis, Mr. Mostyn, or some other county man, so as to avoid mingling at all prominently among the town people, and make it apparent that he was much among the county families. It is astonishing how much appearance of intimacy may be coined out of the most trifling acquaintance, if you are only careful never to waste one of your opportunities on strictly private personal intercourse.

Mr. Buller was therefore very well aware of all that had passed. He had watched with keen interest the much-discussed waltzes, and had greatly rejoiced at the Prince's whim thus unexpectedly to

distinguish Rose Playfair. Anything tending to turn her head was clearly so much to his advantage. He rubbed his hands with much glee as he watched Mr. Wycherley talking to Mrs. Playfair and her daughter. "That fellow will entangle himself, as sure as fate," he muttered to himself. Then he sat down to the consideration of sundry notes which he had made respecting the Wycherley estate, since he had had all the papers relating to the property in his hands, jotting down many intricate calculations respecting his own funds, and the length of Mr. Tollmache's tenancy, with other matters of a similar character; and arriving at the conclusion that, on the whole, his affairs in this special respect were in a flourishing condition.

He had need of some little consolation, for fortune on other points was still somewhat unpropitious. There had been another meeting of the town council the previous day, when the report and recommendations of the engineer employed to examine into the drainage question had been considered. The sitting had been long, and its course somewhat turbulent. The engineer sweepingly condemned the whole drainage system of the town.

"It's all very well," said Mr. Dyson, "to say the drainage is radically deficient. But, it seems to me, it's done well enough in times past."

"Perhaps, when the town was a quarter the size it is now; but I am speaking of it as it is at this moment. You can, of course, if you choose, make a piece of patchwork of it. It would cost less for the moment, and all have to be done over again in a few years. If you adopt the plan I suggest, it will cost

more at the present time, but then it will be done once for all."

This speech at once let loose the dogs of war, many of which, hitherto securely chained and muzzled, had been set free by the split over this very question between Moss and Buller. The one side declared it to be a question of false economy against judicious liberality; the other, one of reckless expenditure against prudent economy. The discussion grew more than once so stormy, that it needed all the mayor's authority to restore order. Mr. Moss having used the subject, as far as it was available, as a weapon against his rival, and having, he felt, secured his own character by prompt adoption of plans approved by the town surveyor for the improvement of his own house property, was somewhat less public spirited than on a former occasion, and expressed his opinion that the corporation could not be expected to do more than remedy existing defects at the least possible cost. Mr. Dyson, who meditated retiring in a few years from business and the neighbourhood, warmly supported him, holding, he said, that any such attempt to legislate for the future was an unjustifiable interference with the working of an over-ruling Providence.

"I quite agree with you, gentlemen," said Mr. Harrison. "In this case especially, when we know quite well that this expense has been in some measure forced upon the corporation by the culpable negligence of private individuals, I hold that the least costly plan should be adopted, without reference to future possibilities."

He accompanied this speech with a vindictive

glance at Mr. Buller, who had felt it advisable to keep himself as much in the background as possible; and had therefore quietly listened, without taking any active part in the discussion.

"Order, order, gentlemen!" interposed the mayor. "Our present business is solely to settle the question of the best course to adopt, not to indulge in any personalities."

"I hold, sir, one is bound to give a reason for one's opinion," said Mr. Harrison.

"You had better merely say for which plan you vote, sir."

This checked any further attempt at direct personal vituperation; but the remark had quite sufficiently indicated a victim upon whom the wrath of all parties concerned might be outpoured. The engineer, when questioned respecting the cost of his proposed amendments, named a startling sum, at the same time distinctly stating that had the matter been taken in hand a few years earlier, it would have proved a much less costly affair,—but that the increase of building, and the great advance in the cost of both labour and material, would very nearly double the outlay necessary.

This was a telling thrust, the edge of which was by no means blunted by the mayor's laconic "Just so," in reply, followed by an emphatic "Hear, hear!" from the small minority which had steadily supported his efforts for so long to secure proper sanitary measures; and smarting under the consciousness of being thus hoist with their own petard, there was fierce satisfaction to both sides in turning upon a common victim. Almost every speech that followed

contained some covert thrust or insinuation, patent, yet defying notice; and when at last the more thorough reform was carried, and the meeting broke up, Mr. Buller had endured more personal annoyance than had ever before been compressed for him into so short a space of time, and his parting salutations were received with a coldness which abundantly guaranteed his rival's triumph. He cursed them all as he walked home, and set his teeth hard upon his determination that they should all some day rue that afternoon, mastered by the social prestige of Mr. Buller of Wycherley Court, and chastised, if they did not make ample amends, by his use of sundry annoying rights as lord of the manor, of which his study of the Wycherley papers had made him aware. The idea so consoled him, that he smiled quite blandly on the rector, whom he met coming out of the Court gateway, mentally noting him down as one of the few people in the town whom he would ask to dine with him at Wycherley Court.

Lionel Lawrence had been lunching that day at the Court, and Rose Playfair and her affairs had occupied a considerable share of his and Miss Tollmache's time and thoughts.

"I certainly never saw a prettier sight in a ballroom," Kate said, "than those two waltzing together; and she was looking remarkably well. I don't in the least wonder at the Prince being taken with her."

"Was Huddlestone there?"

"Yes."

"That is well."

"I saw him watching the waltz, and I fancied

he looked a little grave. I most devoutly wish," she added, with some anxiety in her tone, "that Mr. Wycherley was well away from the neighbourhood. I am not sure but that the Prince's attentions were unfortunate."

"I think they cut two ways," he answered.

"How so?"

"Well, on the one hand, they have provided a cause for comparatively harmless slandering and backbiting. As it is patent that she never saw the Prince before, and is certainly never likely to see him again, it would be hard for even the most ingenious fancy to twist out of the circumstance anything derogatory to her moral character. This is so far an advantage. But then, on the other hand, her silly little head is likely enough to be turned by such attentions."

"That was what I had thought of."

"I am not sure, Miss Tollmache, that on that point you have not yourself done her but poor service."

"I, Mr. Lawrence?"

"Yes, you," he replied, smiling at her astonished look.

"How can that possibly be?"

"I am not sure that it would be easy to explain. I doubt whether you have any clear understanding of the situation. I suppose, however, that you know we are a very radical set in Monksford?"

"So I have heard."

"Do you know what radicalism means, in a country town like this?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, the main feature of the creed is a constant reiteration of the fact that we are quite as good as anyone else, the secret meaning of which assertion is, that we are a great deal better, and especially greatly superior to you, the landed gentry of the country.

"I'm sure I hope you are a great deal better than some," she said, with a slightly curling lip. "But what has all that to do with Rose Playfair?"

"I was coming on to that. You must understand that this satisfactory consciousness of our own superiority is purely general and collective, and by no means prevents our being exceedingly eager, individually, to be on terms of intimacy with people possessed of coats-of-arms, liveries, and ancestors,—luxuries which, in fact, we always indulge in the moment we have a chance. Our ancestors we order at so much a-piece at certain shops in London of which I could tell you—but this by the way. You will observe that this slight contradiction between general theories and particular proclivities introduces some confusion into our sentiments. When therefore I, for instance, gain admittance to your circles, I am immediately greatly puffed up, chiefly probably because I have secured something which all my neighbours greatly desire and cannot obtain; while all those neighbours indulge in a curious sort of tangled up indignation, hating me at one and the same time for a supposed intimacy with you, which is denied to them, and for the treachery to the 'just as good as you' theory, involved in my evidently having made use of mean and derogatory arts to push myself into the society of people of higher rank

than myself. I have used myself as an instance. Substitute for me Rose Playfair, and you will understand my meaning. She is unquestionably a silly little thing, and both she and her mother are so elated at your seeking her acquaintance, that I believe there is no absurd anticipation they are not capable of building upon the fact; while everyone else in the place, incited by jealousy, is ready to tear her to pieces on every imaginable occasion."

Kate Tollmache heaved a deep sigh. "Are you portraying facts?" she asked, "or colouring up a fancy picture?"

"Painting a faithful picture of a certain class; the class of whom we are now speaking."

"I thought it was we who were the apostles of a hollow artificial life; that things grew more real and true as you descended."

"Everyone knows the seamy side of his own life; sees only the best side of his neighbour's life. But you must go lower still for a life without shams."

"To what class?"

"To the class to which by birth I belong; a class earning their living by their own honest labour, without being absolutely pinched and straitened to find the necessaries of life; able to pay their way honestly in the world, and keep a trifle in hand for accidents or emergencies. Unless they are wilfully and deliberately false, it is with them that life is thoroughly true."

"Tell me about your early life," she said.

"There is little to tell. When I can first remember, my father and mother were just about able to pay their way, and maintain themselves respect-

ably, and no more. But they were a much attached couple, and I believe there was never a happier little home in this world. Like most seaside places, it was a terrible place for drinking, and I have often heard my mother say she believed, among all her acquaintances, she could hardly have named three women, besides herself, for whom a public-house had no terrors. My father was busy all day in his shop, and my mother with her household cares; and the best part of my infant days were spent in playing about the beach. I suppose, even then, my father and mother must have had trials and anxieties like other people, but I can never remember anything but cheerful contentment, cleanliness, and frugal comfort, and always a loving smile for their darling. I fancy I can see my mother now, sitting working at the cottage door on a fine evening, my father smoking his evening pipe, and chatting to one neighbour or another, who chanced to stroll in. He was greatly respected for his sterling honesty, integrity, and good sense. I doubt if anyone knows the amount of good he did, in reconciling enemies, checking quarrels, and explaining misunderstandings."

"Go on," she said, as he paused. "You are sketching a charming picture."

There was just the faintest tremor in her voice, and could he but have seen it, a suspicious brightness in her eyes, as her thoughts flew back to her own childhood,—nursed in luxury, with obsequious attendants always at her command, and yet so lonely! How often she had pined for the love which had been so lavishly bestowed upon the humble cottage child!

"Am I to give you a complete history of my life?"

"I shall only be too glad if you will."

"It is easily done. I don't think there was ever a life more entirely devoid of incident. I was sent to the parish school as soon as I was old enough, where there was fortunately a good master. I made good progress, but that was far more a matter of home than of school influence. My father was a well-informed man, and he was never too tired or too busy to sit down and help me with my lessons, and I was always sure of a smile and kiss from my mother when I had done well. It must have been a dull child who did not get on well under such auspices, and I think it was the rapidity of my progress which first set them upon the idea of making me a gentleman. I can remember, when I was about ten years old, several conferences between my father and the schoolmaster, and extra instruction being provided for me. My father's business was increasing as the little place began to grow into a town; still it was a great undertaking for them, and I shall never know how much toil and self-denial my education cost them. I was sent to a boarding-school when I was about twelve years old, and then to college, and was ordained to a curacy in the north as soon as I was old enough for orders. You see I am a very tame common-place individual, Miss Tollmache. There was never a hope of my turning out to be the lost son of some wicked earl, or any other equally romantic personage. I am a simple son of the people, without a history of any sort."

"But did your parents live to see their hopes fulfilled?"

"Ah, that is the sad part of the story," he said, with a little huskiness in his voice.

"Oh, forgive me. I should not have asked."

"There is no need. I can speak of it now. My poor father died just six months after I was ordained, only just living to see his efforts crowned with success, not to enjoy the contemplation of that for which he had toiled so unweariedly. Then I hoped to have taken my mother to live with me, but she never held up her head from the day of my father's death. The only wish that she seemed to have left was, that she might hear me preach once. That wish was granted, and she died a few weeks afterwards; and I have been ever since a lonely man."

There was a quiet pathos in his voice which checked all comment. "Thank you very much for telling me," Kate said gently. "I have often wished to know something of your history."

"Why did you never ask me?"

"I thought I might pain you."

"What? Did you think I was ashamed of my humble origin?"

"Oh no, no; not for a moment! I never suspected you of such meanness. I think I rather feared lest you might put a wrong construction on any expressed wish of ours to know anything about your past history."

"You need have had no fear. Do not for a moment suppose, Miss Tollmache, that I ever forget that you give me entrance to your house solely in right of my professional position."

"We do nothing of the kind," she replied, a trifle sharply.

"How not?" he asked, smiling a little at her tone. "Had I been the carpenter who does repairs for you, or the glazier who mends your windows, should I have been now sitting here, in your drawing-room, drinking tea and chatting to you?"

"Certainly not. You would simply then have been a man of whom one would have remarked, that nature had intended you for something different from what circumstances had made you. But you would not have had your natural capabilities developed by an education calculated to level all distinctions of mere social grade, and been thereby rendered a man fit only for the companionship of people of education and refined ideas."

"You have thought over these subjects before," he said.

"I always think over the various aspects of such questions as circumstances bring naturally under my notice. You told me long since you were the son of a tradesman, and I have sometimes tried to fancy you behind your father's counter, coming to the conclusion that you would look as much out of place there as would—well, your worthy fellow-townsman, Mr. Octavius Buller, in my drawing-room."

"If he heard you—!"

"If he did, and it taught him to strut a little less, and not turn out his toes quite so much, he would owe me an immense debt of gratitude. But how far we have wandered from our starting point. I think I see what you mean. I certainly never

supposed such small attentions as I have been in the habit of paying her, could turn my poor little Rose's silly head. I have never asked her to meet any of our own people here, simply because I knew they would treat her with supercilious indifference; and I never supposed she would be so much elated by merely coming to luncheon with me occasionally. She must be even more silly than I gave her credit for being."

"She is a silly girl, with a silly mother in the background; and whenever I think of the subject, I always find myself ending with a sigh, and a muttered 'Poor Huddlestone.'"

In something less than twenty-four hours after that conversation, Monksford was able to report that Mr. and Miss Tollmache, attended by a man-servant and lady's maid, had driven to the station, and to add an exhaustive list of the number and sort of portmanteaus and other packages which accompanied them; and in a little more than the like period of time, "poor Huddlestone" was leaning his back against the chimney-piece in his mother's drawing-room, engaged in somewhat anxious discussion with her over the same subject which had occupied the rector's and Miss Tollmache's thoughts on the previous afternoon.

Having ascertained that Lady Jarvis, Mrs. Mostyn, and others were in the habit of being at home on one afternoon during the week, the ladies of Monksford had of course followed their lead,—their performances on these occasions being chiefly remarkable for a certain amount of elaborate preparation, the total absence of which was perhaps the only

special point in which the Olympians had the advantage of them, and a slight inclination to touchiness regarding any of their acquaintances chancing to call on any other than the stipulated day, as possibly implying a wish to get off doing more than leaving a card.

That these little gatherings tended greatly to the diffusion of knowledge, useful or otherwise, will easily be understood, and they were held in but slight esteem by some of the dwellers in Monksford, among others by Mrs. Huddlestone. She was, however, occasionally compelled to practise a little self-sacrifice in the matter, and on this very day she had ruefully remembered that it was Mrs. Collier's afternoon, and that she ought to pay her a visit.

Mrs. Collier's drawing-room was a pleasant room, opening upon a charming garden behind the house. There was, therefore, no chance of convenient warning of approaching visitors; so the announcement of Mrs. Huddlestone fell somewhat like a bomb-shell into the midst of an animated discussion of the Playfair enormities, resulting from a detailed account by Miss Witham of her mission of Christian friendliness, and its uncompromising repulse.

There was a sudden pause, and an evident introduction of a fresh subject on the part of Mrs. Collier, as soon as Mrs. Huddlestone was seated, in a mention of the Duchess's diamonds, and the admiration they had excited. But Mrs. Corbett, who was present, was not a woman to allow the chance of handling a dangerous topic to slip by unused.

"We have been speaking of the great compliment paid to your intended daughter-in-law, Mrs. Huddle-

stone. It must be very gratifying to Mr. George Huddlestone to see her so distinguished. Such a compliment to his taste!"

"I don't know that royal people have any special gift of good taste, Mrs. Corbett; and I am sure my son did not choose Miss Playfair for her pretty face and figure, so I do not think he would care very much about the matter."

"I should think Mr. George Huddlestone was far from being gratified," put in Miss Witham. "Such attentions are anything but desirable. My con—"

"Mrs. Playfair!"

The Hereditary Grand Duke of Pumpernickel was thus ruthlessly extinguished. Miss Witham prepared to be dignified and distant, and Mrs. Huddlestone welcomed the appearance of Mrs. Playfair with far greater pleasure than the event usually afforded her. Her son's intended marriage was no favourite topic of conversation with her. She could not cordially rejoice over it, and she was a bad dissembler.

There was an unmistakable assumption of dignified superiority in Mrs. Playfair's manner as she entered, which caused an instant bristling up all round the room. Her greeting, even to Mrs. Huddlestone, was tinged with condescension.

"I am so glad to find you here. I thought I saw your carriage. It is quite an age since I saw you last. I have been really so busy, I have had no time to visit anyone. I have so much to think of for Rose. Ah, Fanny; good afternoon, my dear! Rose sends you her best love. She is so sorry not to come with me, but the poor dear child is quite

out of spirits to-day, and really not fit for visiting. She feels the Tollmaches going away so much. They are likely to be absent some time, and it makes such a difference to her, being so intimate with Miss Tollmache. Did you enjoy the ball, Fanny?"

"Very much," replied that young lady, shortly.

"Ah, I wished afterwards I had gone myself. Well, you all had a lesson in waltzing. They tell me it was quite a sight to see my Rose waltzing with Mr. Wycherley."

Miss Collier gave her head a slight toss.

"I don't see very much in Mr. Wycherley's waltzing," she replied; "and I think there's too much difference in height between him and Rose for him to look well waltzing with her. I've seen men dance much better."

"Oh, my dear, don't say that! What will people think of you? Mr. Wycherley has quite a European reputation as a waltzer."

She glanced round with a superb smile, as she hazarded this daring statement. This sudden and unexpected offensive movement on her part had produced some confusion in the ranks of the enemy, and she was nearly becoming master of the situation; would probably have been so, but for Mrs. Corbett. A woman with a reputation for plain speaking to maintain is not easily routed.

"I don't know about a European reputation, Mrs. Playfair," she said,—"that is a sweeping term; but he has a pretty widespread reputation for a good deal besides dancing. In my opinion, he is anything but a desirable acquaintance for any young lady, especially one with whose family he is unacquainted."

"Really? Well, Mrs. Corbett, you won't suffer from any annoyance of that kind. For my own part, I think Mr. Wycherley a very charming, agreeable man; and as you take so much interest in the matter, I daresay you will be glad to know that I am acquainted with Mr. Wycherley myself, as well as my daughter. In fact, he will, I trust, dine with us next week. He has promised to do so if possible."

This point-blank discharge silenced even Mrs. Corbett's guns, for the moment at least. "What a lie!" was the emphatic rejoinder which rose to her lips; and though the rules of social intercourse checked even her plain speaking short of such a reply, the words and sentiment struggled so hard for utterance, that they barred the way for any more appropriate speech. Everyone looked at everyone else, and Mrs. Playfair smiled complacently on them all. She was by no means blind to her triumph, and she thoroughly enjoyed it. They were, of course, all very good Christians in Monksford. It was a very moral town. Twice within the memory of man the white gloves of traditional usage has celebrated a maiden assize, and all the community rejoiced much in their superiority over other less immaculate places. Perhaps it was a humble effort on their part to carry out their own interpretation of the injunction, "Honour to whom honour is due," but certainly they were not behind other good Christians in their apportioning of right-hand seats and footstools; and the not always too-well dressed wife of the struggling country practitioner, with a large family, had been wont to find her footstool both low and

hard. To this she had meekly submitted, subdued by the depressing consciousness of her well-worn dress, shabby furniture, and hardly paid bills. Now, expanding in the warmth of a gleam of social success, she had boldly appropriated to herself a more exalted seat, and she meant to keep it. She prepared to pursue her victorious career, and without waiting for a reply, turned upon Miss Witham.

"By-the-bye, Miss Witham, I think you were good enough once to mention to me the name of some place in London from which to get excellent silks. I forgot to note it down, and have forgotten the address. I know so little of London. I shall want some really handsome silks for Rose, and Hammond has nothing fit to be worn, I think. I shall be so much obliged for the address."

"I will send it," Miss Witham replied, a little shortly; and Mrs. Collier exchanged a glance with Mrs. Corbett, one of whose plain-spoken opinions was that, admiral's cousin though she was, Miss Witham had a commission in silk, not in cash, for all orders thus secured to the firm in question.

"Thank you so much. And how is the dear mayor, Mrs. Huddlestone? I am so charmed with the new house. One can begin so see now what the rooms will be like. I think the dining-room is a trifle small, but the drawing-room will be lovely, and my Rose's boudoir a perfect gem. But, do you think, Mrs. Huddlestone, the house will be quite dry by the time it is required? I cannot let my Rose go into a house with the least suspicion of damp about it. She takes cold easily."

"I think you may safely leave that matter in George's hands," Mrs. Huddlestone said, rather coldly, as she rose to go.

The new character in which Mrs. Playfair had chosen to appear, was one about as repugnant to her as any which could possibly have been assumed. Her own origin was quite as humble as Mrs. Playfair's, yet she looked quite at home amidst all the luxuries and refinements with which wealth had surrounded her; her natural honest straightforward simplicity of character investing her with a certain quiet dignity of demeanour, entirely independent of her surroundings. Mrs. Playfair, as the harassed wife and mother, struggling with all the difficulties of bringing up a large family on a small income, and maintaining at the same time the appearance necessary to her husband's professional position, had been to her an object of respect and kindly sympathy. But Mrs. Playfair, putting on ridiculous airs of offensive superiority, was simply to her a repulsive specimen of vulgar-minded assumption, most painful to contemplate, as the future mother-in-law of her own dearly-loved son. When seated in her carriage, and on her way home, she fairly broke down, and had a good hearty cry. Rose was very pretty and very amiable; but what more solid advantages could she hope to find in a girl not possessed of any great force of character, and brought up by such a mother?

She was sitting in the drawing-room, still in her walking dress, sunk in deep and anxious thought, when George himself looked in. He was very quick

to read the mother whom he dearly loved, and he immediately came forward.

"Mother, what is the matter?"

"Oh, my boy, I have been so vexed—" and then she paused, struggling with a strong inclination to cry again.

"Vexed! What about?"

"I was at Mrs. Collier's, and Mrs. Playfair came in. You never saw a woman behave in such a way."

"Giving herself great airs of grandeur, I suppose," he said, with a slightly forced smile.

"Airs! You never saw anything so ridiculous. Her head seems to be perfectly turned."

"I know it. I have had a taste of it myself."

"You, George? Do you mean she gave herself airs to you?"

"She was rather high and mighty. The truth is, this affair of the ball has completely upset her balance."

"And Rose?"

"Rose is just like herself. If anything, rather more affectionate to me than ever."

"But, George, I don't like all this talk about Mr. Wycherley; and Mrs. Playfair declared to-day that he was going to dine with them next week."

"Wycherley dine at the Playfairs'? My dear mother!"

"She said so."

"Did she say the Prince was coming to meet him there? The one thing is just about as probable as the other."

"Well, at anyrate, she cries him up, and that is what I don't like."

"No more do I. But what can one do?"

Such a painful, anxious look came over his face with the words, that a new dread seized upon his mother's heart. She rose from her seat, and clasping both her hands round his arm, looked up at him with sad wistful eyes.

"My boy, you are uneasy about Rose? Are you doubtful of her?"

"Uneasy, mother, yes—but not doubtful. Dearly as I love my little girl, I am not blind to her failings. She is all that is gentle and amiable, but she wants firmness and decision of character. She is made of too pliable material. Therefore I am uneasy at the thought of her being entirely under the influence of a silly mother, with a head crammed with ridiculous ideas."

"But if she's true to you, George?"

"She is true to me. I am sure of it. But you know, mother, I am not much to look at, and I am no lady's man. Wycherley admires Rose, there can be no doubt of that—and small wonder too. If her foolish mother gets it into her head that she has any chance of catching him, she'll be for ever drawing contrasts, and trying to set Rose against me; and that is what makes the thought of Rose's pliant nature an anxious one to me."

Mrs. Huddlestone heart was swelling with indignation which she could hardly repress. Her peerless George to be in any danger of such treatment! and that on the part of a portionless little damsel, with nothing to bring with her save a pretty face and

figure! For an instant, an almost wild hope sprang up within her that it might be so; that George would be rescued in spite of himself. But one glance at his sad face banished the momentary thought with a sharp pang, and filled her with but one ardent wish to aid and console her darling son in any possible way.

"My dear boy, what can be done?"

"Nothing that I can see, unless our marriage could be hastened."

"And why not? Why should it not take place at once? You could have a home here until your own house is ready for you."

"Are you in earnest, mother?"

"In utmost earnest, George. I won't deny your father and I felt a little anxious about your choice. You see you are such an excellent match for one of those girls; and we wanted to feel sure about her before it was too late. But this quite alters the state of the case. If your happiness is in any way in danger, let the marriage take place at once."

"You are very good, mother. I know you have never quite approved my choice; but, believe me, when Rose is away from her home, and under your influence, you will see her change very much. I will see Doctor Playfair about the matter at once."

Thus, mother like, Mrs. Huddlestone threw all her weight into the very scale which she would fain have seen fly up, and reaped her reward in her son's brightened looks.

"What could I do, James?" she pleaded. "I

would he had fancied anyone else; but his happiness is evidently at stake. How could I do otherwise than aid my own son, when that is the case? Let them marry as soon as possible, and she shall have as comfortable a home here as I can give her until her own house is ready for her."

CHAPTER XXII.

GLOOMY PORTENTS.

THESE words concluded a short conversation with the mayor, just before Mrs. Huddlestone went up to her room to dress for dinner. After dinner, George and his father had a little talk over the same subject, in which naturally business occupied a more prominent part than sentiment.

"From all I hear, and all your mother tells me, my boy," the mayor said, "I heartily agree with her that the sooner the marriage takes place the better. The sooner, under the circumstances, a pretty inexperienced girl like Rose is removed from under the care of such a marvellously silly mother, the better for all concerned."

"Inexperienced." It is a useful but a dangerous word. It is easy to say to your friend or relative that his heart's idol is inexperienced, and thereby account for precautions which point equally naturally to exceeding silliness. But, on the other hand, it is also easy for him to say "My darling is very inexperienced," and to hug the delusion that he really

believes she is *only* inexperienced, and will in time grow wiser;—a dangerous form of self-deceit, considering the inevitable adjustment of things to their true proportions, which must come sooner or later. Could Mr. Huddlestone have seen how grateful his son felt to him for the way in which he put the matter, he might not perhaps have regarded it as altogether a hopeful sign.

After a short discussion about settlements, George went off in high spirits to hold conference with Doctor Playfair. He was by no means so violently elated as his wife, but having always hitherto felt a galling sense of the entirely one-sided advantage of the proposed marriage, it was very pleasant to him to contemplate the sudden increase of importance which recent events had brought his daughter. Still, with him, common sense would probably have carried the day. The marriage was an excellent one, and he felt and admitted that the mayor's proposals with regard to settlements were most generous.

"But I must not positively settle this matter," he said, after hearing all that George could urge in furtherance of his own wishes, "without consulting my wife. She has of course a right to a voice in all that concerns our children."

George could not but allow this to be indisputable; nevertheless his heart sank a little when a message was despatched requesting Mrs. Playfair's presence in the little consulting room.

Mrs. Playfair heard the proposition, and assumed at once an air of much importance. "It is a matter requiring much consideration," she said.

"But, my dear, you must allow that Mr. Huddlestone's intentions are most generous. His wishes, under the circumstances, should have strong weight."

"Undoubtedly; but in such a case as the present, a mother's first thought must be for her child."

"I don't think, Mrs. Playfair, you will meet with any objection on Rose's part," George said; which remark drew upon him a very superb glance.

"I am quite in my child's confidence, George; but at the moment I was not so much thinking of her wishes as of her advantage. I am afraid you will think me very unsympathising; but I must confess I had been meditating suggesting a postponement of the marriage, rather than hastening it."

George did look startled. "A postponement, my dear?" Doctor Playfair repeated.

"Yes. It is a very serious step, and Rose is very young. I have sometimes had doubts about the wisdom of allowing her to undertake all the cares and responsibilities of married life at her age, especially in a case where there are other drawbacks. I very much object to a girl marrying until her own house is quite prepared to receive her. Even should the marriage take place in the spring, as originally intended, it would be four or five months at least before the new house could be ready; and, as George knows, I have great doubts about it being then dry enough to make it safe for Rose to go into it."

"Ah, yes. Well, of course, these are matters for consideration," said Doctor Playfair. "You see, my dear fellow, your proposal has taken us rather by

surprise. With all anxiety to meet your father's wishes, we must have time for consideration."

"Will you let Rose herself decide the point, Doctor Playfair?" George asked.

Doctor Playfair hesitated, and looked at his wife. "I think there can be no objection to that course, my love," he said.

"Certainly not," Mrs. Playfair replied with alacrity.

"Then shall we send for Rose?"

"No, no; not in such a hurry. Rose must have the matter clearly explained to her, and have time to reflect before she decides. I will take an early opportunity of letting her know of George's wish, and of Mr. and Mrs. Huddlestone's most kind and generous intentions; and will give her every reason both for and against. Then she shall decide the point herself."

There was clearly no reasonable objection to be offered to this course, so George was fain to express himself satisfied. But he went home that night with a heavier heart than he had ever known since his engagement to Rose; and when his mother heard what had passed, there dawned in her heart, amidst all her loving sympathy with her son's trouble, a distinct hope that he would yet be saved, although she knew it would be so as by fire.

Rose's decision was very shortly made known to George, in a note from Mrs. Playfair herself. Rose fully appreciated Mr. and Mrs. Huddlestone's kindness, but would not like to be so long without a home of her own, so thought, as the house could not possibly be ready sooner, the arrangement had better stand as it was. There was a little note from

Rose enclosed, very loving and sweet. Of course, she said, she would dearly like to be married at once, were it possible, but there were many little difficulties. "And really, besides," she added, with very straightforward candour, "you know, dear George, I am not a damsel with a long purse, who can afford just to order everything she wants without further thought. I shall have to contrive a good deal to get everything I shall want, and really shall have enough to do to get everything ready before the spring; so don't be very much disappointed or think me unkind, there's a darling old fellow." And poor George sighed, and admitted he had no just cause for complaint.

The rector, in his secret heart, thought Monksford unusually dull now the Tollmaches were gone,—far more so than it had ever seemed in times past; and renewed his partially disused habit of spending many evenings at The Hall. He consequently heard all that was going on, and said to himself oftener than ever—"Poor Huddlestone!" The mayor spoke openly enough.

"I dare not hint it to my poor boy, but I do not feel the slightest doubt myself that if she can, that ridiculous woman will make the girl throw him over, in the wild anticipation that she will be able to catch one of the county men."

"If she can. Do you think it?"

"I hardly know. The girl is easily led. I cannot but wish sometimes, Lawrence, that George had never seen her."

Rose was very loving the first time she and George met after the rejection of his suggestion.

"Dear George," she said, "you don't think me very unkind, do you, for saying that I think there had better be no change in our arrangements?"

"Certainly not, my pet. Only a little—"

"A little what?"

"A little disappointing, I think. I thought you would be quite as anxious to come to me at once, as I am to have you."

"Yes; but, dear, there are so many things to think of. I could not tell you all in my note. You see if I married you now, and went to live at The Hall for so long, mamma and the girls would expect to be coming constantly to see me, and—and—I don't think, George, your mother and mamma would get on very well, if they saw much of each other. I should have felt very anxious and frightened, lest your mother should be in any way annoyed."

"She would have risked it willingly, Rose."

"I know she would. She is so good and kind. But would it not have been selfish, dear, to let her do so merely for the sake of our being married a little sooner? For which, after all, there is no very special reason."

The good sense and good feeling of these arguments George was fain to admit. Still they did not reassure him to the extent which such an admission seemed to require.

There were no signs of diminution in Mrs. Playfair's triumphant exultation; indeed it was not a little increased by this episode,—and all Monksford was very soon taken into her confidence. Could it be supposed that any ordinary mother should rise superior to the temptation of talking to other

mothers in a somewhat depreciatory tone of a match secured by her own daughter, for which they had all been anxiously laying their lines, and which they had all spoken of as such a great catch for Rose.

"George Huddlestone, and his father and mother too, for the matter of that, are most anxious for the marriage to take place at once," she said to Mrs. Collier. "And I must say, Mr. and Mrs. Huddlestone are most kind. They would give Rose charming apartments at The Hall until her own house is ready. But I will not hear of such a thing. I tell George, if he wants my Rose, he must just wait for her until he has a proper home ready to receive her."

"And what does Rose say to that?" asked Mrs. Collier, smiling blandly, as she tendered the snare, into which Mrs. Playfair instantly walked.

"Oh, Rose has quite good sense enough to see the wisdom of our objections."

"It is fortunate she is so prudent and sagacious. For my own part, I must confess I would rather see a girl of her age more swayed by love and less by worldly wisdom. It is lucky for you, Mrs. Playfair, you have not my Fanny to deal with. You would find it hard to teach her such sage lessons, where the wishes of the man she loved were in question."

"Rose has been too happy at home to be in a hurry to leave it," retorted Mrs. Playfair, hastily discharging the only shaft which came to hand; "and has too much confidence in her parents, not to be guided by their decision."

"I am sure I sincerely hope all may turn out well for her," Mrs. Collier replied, in a tone full of unspoken meaning. Then she turned and addressed

some remark on a wholly different subject to Mrs. Harrison, and thus, changing the topic of conversation, with an appearance of deliberate intention, worsted her antagonist, and might fairly hug the satisfactory conviction that she had had the best of the encounter.

Mrs. Playfair was more successful in other quarters; and succeeded in making it known generally in Monksford, ere long, that the ladies of the town, herself among the number, she frankly owned, had really spoilt George Huddlestone by making too much of him, and taught him to think himself such an excellent catch, that any girl might be glad to get him on his own terms. But that having chosen to fix his hopes on a girl so much thought of and admired as her Rose, he must learn that he was not quite so all-conquering a hero as he perhaps imagined.

Such sentiments were not of course exactly like oil upon the angry waves of Monksford maternal jealousy, and they were tossed from mouth to mouth with every possible variation and addition. Even Mrs. Huddlestone, little as she was used to heed the talk of the place, flushed a little at what she heard.

"It is really past bearing," she said to her husband. "Of course it's nothing against the Playfairs that they can scarce feed and clothe all that family. Still, for such people to talk of such a match as George, as if he was hardly worth that girl accepting, because she has a pretty face, is downright insolence."

"My dear Margaret, of what consequence is the

chatter of a silly woman, who probably, after all, has not said half which is laid to her? Are you going to begin and worry yourself with all these tattling gossips?"

"No, indeed. But this is really too bad." And Mrs. Huddlestone sighed, and so did her husband; but neither said anything more.

Mr. Octavius Buller heard all that was passing, from the lips of his wife, with keen interest. He even grew solicitous on her account again. "You are looking pale, Louisa," he said; "you stay too much in the house. Why don't you go out more?"

"There's nothing the matter, Octavius, only I'm a little tired with getting the house cleaned up a bit before the winter. There's so much dust from the street in summer. I declare it's worse than the fires in winter."

"All the more reason why you should go out more," replied Mr. Buller autocratically, perceiving that it is difficult for a man to keep all sides of a question constantly before him, and that, in the present case, he had rashly opened, himself, a possible way for another appeal on the score of the need of more servants. "Work never hurts any one who gets plenty of fresh air. Go and see Mrs. Dyer this afternoon. Dyer told me yesterday she was confined to the house with a cold. She'll be glad to see you."

Mrs. Buller obediently complied; with the results fully anticipated by her liege lord. She returned well charged with all the local chatter.

"Mrs. Playfair's head seems just fairly turned," she said. "Mrs. Dyson was there, and she told us

Mr. Dyson had told her Mrs. Playfair came into the shop yesterday with Rose, and that the way she talked was really too ridiculous: pretending to talk in an undertone, but saying to the girl, quite loud enough to be heard, that some of the handsomest things they have wouldn't do at all for her, and that she must get things direct from one of the great London firms."

"Well, if Huddlestone chooses to pay for them, that's their own affair."

"Oh yes, of course. But it sets everyone talking to see Mrs. Playfair giving herself such airs. They all think, Octavius, she'll try and break off the marriage if she can, and that that's why she won't hear of it taking place sooner than was intended. Mrs. Corbett declares she believes nothing but one of the Duke's sons will satisfy her now. And they say Rose herself is beginning to look pale and worn, as if she was worried and anxious."

"They say!" repeated Mr. Octavius Buller contemptuously, not for a moment forgetting, while he made use of his wife to secure such information as he desired, the importance of snubbing her into a constant state of docility. "How you women do chatter, to be sure! What does it matter what the Playfairs do? Why can't you leave them to make or mar their own affairs, without tearing them to pieces tooth and nail? It's just like a lot of women."

"I'm sure I don't want to interfere with them, Octavius. I'm only telling you what is said."

To this meek response the great Octavius vouchsafed no reply. He walked to the window, and whistling softly to himself, stood gazing with affec-

tionate interest at the fast fading autumn glories of the Wycherley elms and beeches, while he ruminated on what he had heard. The position of affairs was in some measure satisfactory; but at the same time it was puzzling. Nothing could be more agreeable to him than contemplation of the firm hold he had secured upon the Wycherley estate, or of the attitude assumed by the Playfairs, with its apparently inevitable result of producing in time a coldness between them and the Huddlestones. But then, on the other hand, he was puzzled and uncertain respecting Mr. Wycherley himself. That he had not left the neighbourhood he was very well aware, but had only moved his quarters to Willesbury, where he was spending his time with the officers of the garrison. Still he had certainly not dined at the Playfairs, neither had Mr. Buller been able to see the slightest sign or hear the faintest rumour of his having been seen anywhere about the immediate neighbourhood of Monksford. On this point he felt very anxious. His interviews with his new client had very fully shown him that Mr. Wycherley had no love for the home of his ancestors; in fact, only held by it from a natural dislike to lose the *prestige* attached to possession of the place which had belonged to his family for many generations. A not very heavy weight, he judged, would be quite sufficient to turn the scale the other way, and that weight he fully believed would be more than sufficiently supplied by an entanglement with Rose Playfair, whatever form it might assume. It would be most unfortunate now, if his hopes in this respect were frustrated;

and he almost felt inclined to resent Mrs. Playfair's ill-advised invitation as a direct personal injury, in his dread lest it had acted as a premature note of danger to scare away the intended prey. It was very clear, however, that he could do nothing himself; so he could but watch and listen and hope with what patience he might, until fate was pleased to unveil a little more of the future.

As may well be imagined, life did not at the moment look very roseate-hued to George Huddlestone. He could not but feel that though he trusted it would be but a passing one, still his intended marriage had for the moment brought a faint shadow between him and his father and mother. Although no hint of such a thing ever passed the lips of either, it was undeniable that the conduct of the Playfairs towards the mayor was hardly that which the circumstances demanded. Rose was a penniless girl, whose father might be deemed fortunate if the close of his life saw him able to meet all his just liabilities without dipping into the scanty life assurance which was all that would remain as provision for his family; and this girl Mr. Huddlestone had not only cordially welcomed as the promised bride of his only son, the heir of his large fortune, but had offered to provide for at once by handsome settlements, in order that her father might feel no misgivings about consenting to an immediate marriage. Yet his wishes on the subject had been treated with the most perfect indifference, and the proposal set aside on the most frivolous pretences, with barely an acknowledgment of his liberality and kindness. Such conduct was

certainly a slight, which, looking at all the facts, came very close upon insolence. Even his pretty Rose was not quite blameless in the matter. He would not admit to himself that as a lover he was a shade disappointed at her ready acquiescence in her mother's decision; but he did allow that he wished she had shown a little more distinct appreciation of her future father-in-law's generosity; and if she had yielded to her parents' desire, at least thrown the weight of her own clearly expressed wishes into the opposite scale. But then she was "so inexperienced."

With these feelings strongly upon him, Mrs. Playfair's triumphant proclamation of the course she had adopted caused him the greatest annoyance and displeasure; and on that point he determined to have his say out, hoping, by means of a little talk with Rose herself on the subject, indirectly to convey to her "inexperience" the perception that her own conduct in the matter was not wholly commendable.

He went to the Playfairs' house accordingly the following morning. Its dimensions in proportion to its contents were not such as to render it an easy one in which to find opportunity for confidential discourse, so he at once asked Rose to go out with him, on the convenient plea of inspecting some work at the new house. Mrs. Playfair immediately interposed.

"Really, George, I don't think it is fit for Rose to go. It is a cold damp morning."

"It may be a little damp, Mrs. Playfair; it certainly is anything but cold."

"It is quite hot, mamma," Rose said herself. "I shall like the walk very much."

"Well, my love, be sure you put on that fur jacket I got for you the other day."

"Oh, mamma, what nonsense! I should be gasping in it." And Rose with a merry laugh ran away to get ready for her walk, during which absence Mrs. Playfair entertained George with a manifest air of condescension.

The shortest way to the new house was by a pathway across some fields, affording quite good enough chance for a quiet chat; and George, being by no means an adept at adroit fencing, plunged at once into his subject.

"I only made the house an excuse for asking you to come out, Rosebud. I wanted to speak to you."

"What is it, George?" she asked. But he noticed that her colour changed a little, and that she started slightly.

"You know, my pet, I was a little vexed about the opposition to our being married at once."

"Yes, I know. And I am sorry about it, for your sake. But really, dear George—"

"We need not discuss it, dear, it is settled; and I hope a year hence it will seem a very small trouble. But I want you, dear Rose, to try and induce your mother not to speak about the matter as she does."

"How, George? I don't understand!"

"Dear child, I am sure you must feel that my father was very kind about it."

"He is always very kind to me. I don't see what you mean about this particularly."

"Perhaps you do not quite understand, my pet. You know, at this moment, I could make no proper settlements upon you without my father's sanction. Being the only child, things have never been so definitely settled as they would have been had I had brothers and sisters. Now, in order to facilitate our immediate marriage, my father offered to make very handsome settlements upon you; and therefore some deference is due to him."

Rose's colour had deepened still more while he spoke. "You could not expect papa and mamma to let the marriage be sooner than they thought well, merely on that account," she said, in a tone which seemed rather to imply that if he was minded to raise a case of Huddlestone *versus* Playfair, she was prepared to take sides with her own people.

"By no means, my love, but I think your mother should not speak of it quite so much as she has done. That is to say, I—I—mean—" he went on blundering and stumbling, under a growing perception that to say what he wished to say of Mrs. Playfair to her own daughter, was a more difficult task than he had counted upon.

"What do you mean, George?"

"Well, my pet, just this. My father has been so very kind and generous in his conduct towards you and me, that I should like to hear any opposition to his wishes spoken of, if mentioned at all, as a matter for regret, not as a thing of course."

Rose made no reply, and hoping that she was reflecting over a new view of the subject presented before her, and that he had thus accomplished his object, George walked on in silence for a few moments.

Then to his no small dismay, Rose suddenly burst into a violent fit of sobbing.

"Rose, my darling! what is the matter?"

There was no reply—only increased sobbing.

"My dearest, don't cry that way," he continued. "What is the matter? What have I said to vex you?"

"Oh, nothing," she sobbed at last. "Only I am so miserable!"

"Miserable? what about, dear child?" he asked, with a wild idea flitting through his mind that there had been some unfair play, some underhand coercion exercised upon his darling.

"Oh, I don't know. Everything seems going wrong. I was sure you were all angry about the marriage not being hurried on; and I am sure there will be unpleasantness. I almost wish sometimes I had never promised to marry you."

"Rose!"

"No, no—I don't mean that really. I do love you, George, indeed I do. If we could be married at once it would be all right. But it is so disagreeable, all these things."

George seized at once on the only salient point in this not very comprehensible phrase. "Well, darling, why should we not be married at once? If you would urge it strongly, your parents would surely yield."

"Oh, no; papa might, perhaps, but not mamma. She is determined it shall not be until the spring; and you do not know how resolute she can be when she chooses. It is very miserable, and I am very unhappy!"

She was soothed down after much petting and coaxing, and was bright and smiling once more by the time they reached home. But when George wished her good-bye, a wistful, anxious look came over her face again, and she put her arms round his neck, and kissed him with more fondness than usual, whispering, "Dear George, you are much too good and kind for me; but indeed I do love you!" Then breaking off with a sudden convulsive sob, she ran away upstairs.

George Huddlestone's heart was not much lightened by that interview. He seemed to have gained very little by his move. He doubted whether he had even succeeded in making her understand what he was aiming at; and her own mood seemed most unaccountable, so wholly without cause. He could make nothing of it, only sigh heavily, and heartily wish that spring was come, so that his marriage might end all this perplexity, and give his precious little Rosebud safe into his own keeping for the whole of her future life.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A VERY IMPORTANT WALK.

FAR away from all this seething and working of the Monksford social cauldron, Kate Tollmache and her father were enjoying the pleasures of a new sensation. The stereotyped routine of their social orbit had never possessed any very special attraction for Mr. Tollmache; but he was not endowed by nature with sufficient individuality of character to jolt him out of the groove into which he had been fitted. So year after year he had spent the appointed weeks of the season in London; then gone through a fitting and regular course of fishing, shooting, or hunting, according to circumstances; then spent two or three months abroad; and having thus got through the whole duty of man for one year, began again the same round with praiseworthy perseverance, ofttimes denouncing the whole system as a bore, but never dreaming of any such radical move as open rebellion.

It remained for the less smoothly and evenly chiselled nature of his daughter openly to revolt.

But when she suggested headquarters for a few weeks at a wild and romantic spot on the Welsh coast, and a yacht, with the occasional companionship of anyone whom he liked to ask to visit him, he took in the whole scope of the project with remarkable alacrity. He was fond of the sea, and knew that he could get as much shooting and fishing in the neighbourhood as would fill up spare time.

"It's an excellent idea," he said. "But won't it be very dull for you, Kate?"

"I never suffered from the complaint, save under the infliction of being amused."

Mr. Tollemache reflected for a while, running over in his mind a list of desirable companions. Then he said, with something of a sigh,—

"As Clanraven won't be home till near Christmas, I suppose we ought to ask your aunt and the girls to come to us?"

"Certainly," replied his daughter gravely.

"Do you think they will come?"

"I am quite sure they will not. Aunt Gwendolyn is both sick and frightened at sea, and the girls are afraid of their complexions."

"Ah well, we shall have paid them the compliment, at anyrate. I should not like Clanraven to think we had been neglectful during his absence. Yes, certainly, it is an excellent scheme of yours, Kate. I'll write to Burton to-night about a yacht. I hope it may be a fine autumn, or it will be running [illegible]."

Then, in the satisfaction afforded by the pleasant prospect thus opened before him, Mr. Tollemache invited [illegible] to bear him company, expressing

much dissatisfaction at the modified time which was all Mr. Lawrence professed himself able to spare.

Over this invitation Miss Bradley had loudly sounded a strain of triumph, especially when she had the good fortune to find Mrs. Tatnell sitting with the Misses Witham one afternoon. She had no special dread of the high-souled Miss Witham, or her two placid inanimate sisters, who seemed little more than a sort of vague shadowy appendage to her more pronounced individuality. But every widow or spinster under the age of five-and-forty stood to her somewhat in the light of a natural foe, and she tuned her lay accordingly.

"Yes, my cousin is going to join Mr. and Miss Tollmache in Wales next week. He did not intend to take any holiday this year, but Mr. Tollmache would take no refusal, and I am very glad, for I am sure Lionel wants rest; he does work so hard. And he will enjoy it so much; he is so fond of the sea, and he is such a sailor. I've heard good judges say he can manage a sailing-boat against any man in England."

"I suppose he had much practice as a boy," remarked Miss Witham, with a little supercilious smile.

"Of course he had; and he is so clever at anything, for all he's so quiet. And Mr. Tollmache is so fond of him; they will both quite enjoy it."

"I wonder what Miss Tollmache will say to it?" suggested Mrs. Tatnell, throwing down a leading question in great thirst for information. There was nothing specially interesting in Mr. Tollmache showing a partiality for the rector's society; but his

daughter's views on the subject were quite another matter.

"Yes, indeed," said Miss Witham; "I should think that would be an important consideration with regard to Mr. Lawrence's chance of enjoying his visit. I should imagine Miss Tollmache would not be a pleasant companion to anyone for whose society she did not particularly wish."

"Miss Tollmache is quite a lady," retorted Miss Bradley, "and would, I am sure, always be agreeable to any gentleman whom her papa invited to visit him. And she and my cousin have always been very good friends."

"Well, I'm sure I hope Mr. Lawrence may enjoy himself," Miss Witham replied, in a tone which implied that she could have said a great deal more on the subject had she chosen; and then they all had a refreshing round over the Playfairs, which subject Mrs. Tatnell handled with the greatest energy and vigour, declaring it to be inconceivable how the Huddlestones should submit to such ridiculous airs, and prophesying, with much apparent satisfaction, that those Playfairs would go a little too far yet, and would find how true it was that pride goes before a fall.

It was not with feelings of wholly unmixed satisfaction that Lionel Lawrence started for Wales. Prudence sometimes sounded an alarm on the subject of his acquaintance with Kate Tollmache; but though he did not entirely refuse to hear her voice, he pointed out to her with questionable logic,—first, that there was no danger, and second, that the risk was well worth running. That is to say, that he

was not at six-and-thirty years of age likely to allow himself to fall violently in love with a wholly unattainable woman, how much soever he might admire her as the ideal of the woman he would, under different circumstances, have adored; but, at the same time, should it come to pass that she should trouble his peace of mind, was it not better for any man that the ennobling influence of such a sentiment should throw a halo over his life, rather than that he should live on to the end of his days a lonely, unloving, and unloved man? He had grown of late to think often that it was not good for man to be alone, understanding that declaration—in the light of his own perception that matrimony may be a state of most utter and hopeless loneliness—to mean that every man was the better for the possession of some pure and lofty ideal, around which all his purest and holiest feelings might centre; and if it should chance that that ideal should be his own wife—ah!—he was wont to break off his meditations at that point with a deep-drawn breath.

Whatever his sensations might be, his host's anticipations were entirely unmixed in their character. "Thank heaven, those people are gone!" he exclaimed to his daughter as he re-entered the drawing-room, after speeding the departure of their last quartet of visitors, a couple of somewhat heavy men, one with an enthusiastic wife, the other with a sentimental sister. "I never knew two such bores."

"You might think a little more of my sufferings," replied his daughter gravely. "That girl actually insisted on reading us a poem last night, of I know not how many lines, written in commemoration of our

last yachting trip; and Mrs. Charteris did estatics. I thought I should have had a fit."

"No. By Jove, you don't mean she did! Well, there's only Lawrence to come now. I wish he were here. I can't believe sometimes," he continued, leaning his back against the chimney piece with a reflective air, "that that fellow's origin is really what he declares it to be."

"I see no reason to doubt his veracity."

"No, of course not. But who would think it. He's the best companion I know, and a fine fellow to boot. I don't think I ever liked a parson before."

Kate made no answer; and not finding her responsive on the subject, Mr. Tollmache sauntered off to smoke his morning cigar on the beach, and watch the fishing-boats come in.

"What of Rose Playfair?" was one of the first questions Kate Tollmache put to the rector after his arrival. "Is Mr. Wycherley gone away?"

"I believe so; at least I have not heard of his being seen in the neighbourhood since a few days after the ball. Still I don't like the look of things." And then he told her all which had happened subsequently to her departure.

Kate gave an angry little stamp of her foot,—a demonstration in which she was wont to indulge when specially wrath upon any subject. "When we get into Parliament," she said, "the first bill I will bring in shall be one for the protection of children from their parents. Who could conceive a woman being such an unutterable fool. What do the Huddlestones think of it?"

"You can't expect a man in Huddlestone's posi-

tion to be very well pleased at being thus curtly treated, when he offers to make handsome settlements on a girl without a sixpence, in order to facilitate her marriage with his own son. But that is a house in which nothing low or mean finds a place. I do not believe one word of disapproval has passed his lips, save to myself. George has set his heart upon the girl, and for his sake, his father is ready to stand to his offer at any moment, if the Playfairs will come round, and to receive the girl as a daughter."

"Will her mother try and make her throw him over?"

"I think not. Before the spring she will probably see the full worth of her triumph, and be prepared to look at things in a rather more common-sense light. If Wycherley had remained in the neighbourhood, or any other of the county people taken any notice of them, I don't think there would have been any folly of which she would not have been capable."

Mr. Tollmache's wishes had been amply fulfilled. A mild, sunny autumn allowed yachting to be prolonged much beyond the usual limits, and he declared himself never to have spent a more enjoyable time. He was perpetually discovering new traits of excellence in his guest.

"I never knew a fellow so devoid of all brag," he said to Kate one day. "I believe there's nothing he can't do, yet he never professes to be able to do anything. He told me he had been accustomed to the sea, and could manage a boat; but I find he's a splendid sailor. I never saw a man handle a craft as he did that little sailing boat we were out fishing

in yesterday. The way he beat up round the point, almost dead in the wind's eye, was the most masterly piece of work I ever saw done. He's a regular Phœnix, Kate."

To which elogiums Kate generally listened in silence, or replied by quietly agreeing that the rector was a charming companion, and it was a great pity he could not stay with them longer than three weeks.

More than a fortnight of the time had passed, and then, one fine breezy morning, when the sun was shining brightly, and the hills were changing their aspect every moment, as the shadows of light clouds, flitting across the sky, chased each other over their smooth green slopes, and broken rocky crags,—some trifling damage to be repaired rendered the yacht unavailable for the day. Kate stood leaning against the window frame, looking somewhat wistfully at a bold headland, towering above the other hills at some five miles distance, and speculating on the chances of getting her father to walk so far.

"Why not go to the top of the headland yonder, father?" she said. "They tell me here the view from it is the finest to be seen for miles. It is just the day for it."

"How far is it?"

"About five miles."

"And how must we go?"

"Oh, walk. There is no other way."

"Thank you. I fancy I see myself setting out to trudge five miles up hill and down dale for the sake of any view in existence. I am too old for such work."

"Or too lazy?"

"Well, which you like. If you want to go, you can. I daresay Lawrence will go with you. He's active enough for anything."

"I shall be delighted, Miss Tollmache," the rector put in, "if you would like the walk."

Kate looked at the hills, and then at Mr. Lawrence, with a certain hesitation of manner very uncommon in her. "How am I to be sure you will not in secret regard the expedition as a tremendous bore?" she asked.

"By doing me the justice to believe I spoke the truth when I said I should be delighted to go. I have heard before of the view from that very point, and am sure it is well worth seeing. Let us start at once, and we shall reach the summit just about the right time of the day."

When Kate Tollmache came down, equipped for the walk, she found the day's programme somewhat modified.

"I'm coming to bring you home in the yacht, Kate," her father said. "I've been down to see about it, and they can have her ready quite in time to run round the coast to a bay a mile or so beyond the headland, where we can take you in quite well. Lawrence has got all directions about the route. We can be round there by four o'clock, and then we shall just about have light enough to get back again."

"We are not to follow the coast line the whole way, it seems," the rector said, as they started. "It is much farther, and a terribly stiff climb at the end. We are to strike inland as soon as we pass the light-

house, and so cut off a mile or two, and ascend by a much more gradual slope."

The expedition was just one after Kate Tollmache's own heart. The active exercise in the crisp fresh autumn air, and bright sunshine, with just wind enough to crest the dancing waves with white streaks of foam, beyond the shelter of the bay; and the hills standing out sharply in the clear atmosphere, with their mingling tints of purple, green, and grey, flecked with broken patches of ever shifting light and shade. But on the present occasion her enjoyment of the situation appeared to be less spontaneous than usual. She expatiated more than once on the charms of the scene and day, with a diffusiveness suggestive rather of a perception of what the sensations of the moment ought to be, than of a keen and purely natural experience of the same.

Lionel Lawrence fully agreed with her; let fall a few common-place remarks about autumn colouring and clearness of atmosphere, and then relapsed into silence. There seemed to be something vaguely portentous about silence, as though some mysterious peril lay hidden in its duration; and Kate felt, she hardly knew why, that she must break it at all costs, so she hazarded a remark about the colour of the sea, and expressed a hope the yacht would be ready in good time.

"I hope so, I am sure," the rector answered, apparently making an effort to rouse himself to the requirements of the occasion; "and that the wind will hold steady, for we shall not have more than just about time enough to get back into the bay

before it is dark; and that is a nasty point to get round."

Another pause. This was not promising, for the first half-hour of a companionship which must last for five or six hours at least. It was only to be hoped that things might improve after a little time, by virtue of that natural tendency of circumstances, if not too roughly driven, to settle down into working order. It was certainly better after they turned away from the smooth firm sand of the beach, and struck across country, with absolutely no track to guide them. There was rough broken ground to be got over; there were occasional bogs to be avoided, or crossed with wariness; there was here an awkward fence, there a treacherous ditch, all wholly destructive of anything approaching sustained conversation; while, at the same time, providing abundant occasion for disconnected spasmodic utterances, which broke the spell of silence.

It was a tolerably rough scramble for something more than an hour, over gradually ascending ground, with the cairn-topped summit for which they were bent standing out clear before them. "How steady the ascent is," Kate said at last, pausing to look back. "I had no idea we had gained such high ground. We shall reach the top easily enough in this way."

"I hope you are not beginning to feel tired," was the reply.

"Not in the least."

"I am glad to hear it, Miss Tollmache, for I strongly suspect there is stiffer work before us than we anticipated."

"How so?"

"Do you see that ridge straight before us?"

"Yes."

"Well, my mind misgives me that beyond that ridge there is a valley to be crossed, before we begin the final ascent; the length of which will depend upon the depth of that valley."

"Let us know the worst at once," she answered laughing, and they started forward again. A few minutes' steady walk brought them over the brow of the hill, and proved Mr. Lawrence correct in his suspicion. Before them lay a gradual descent into a lonely valley, on the opposite side of which rose, steep and uncompromising, the object of their excursion.

"I see how it is," the rector said, after a few moments' contemplation of the scene. "We have missed the route we were intended to follow. We should have borne more to the right, and so got round the shoulder of the hill. I fear it would be too far to retrace our way now; but that is a stiff climb straight before us. Are you afraid of it, Miss Tollmache?"

"Not in the least. There is nothing I enjoy more."

"Then we had better press on at once," he replied, looking at his watch. "We shall not have more than time to reach the bay easily, and without hurrying, by four o'clock. You will need a little rest after such a stiff pull as that."

Away they went rapidly down the slope, and across the smooth green valley; then slowly and steadily, after the fashion of practised climbers, beginning the ascent on the opposite side.

It was steep, but not otherwise hard. The turf was coarse and rough, the ground somewhat broken, and lined here and there with sheep tracks, affording from time to time a convenient breathing spot; and there was, under the circumstances, one great advantage—not the most loquacious of human beings could have found breath for conversation. Slowly, and in silence, save for an occasional remark when they stopped to breathe, they climbed higher and higher, until they reached a narrow track, which appeared to be a faint remnant of some once existing road round the shoulder of the hill.

Above this point the hill side changed its character. The ascent was, if anything, even steeper; the ground was harder, and less broken, and the turf short, smooth, and very dry. They stood for a few moments on the track, admiring the wide and varied landscape stretched out before them, and then turned to continue the ascent. But Mr. Lawrence paused for a moment, and stood looking a little anxiously upwards.

"Miss Tollmache," he said, "are your boot soles well nailed?"

"Certainly," she replied, with a laugh. "Do you take me for a Cockney?"

"No; but this last pull is steep, and the short turf grows very slippery in such dry weather."

"I am not in the least afraid," she answered, setting herself steadily to the climb. She noticed that he drew much closer to her side, and before they had gone very many yards, some internal misgivings began to flit through her own mind. But she was not the woman to yield on such a point, and

she steadily held on her course, though with a growing consciousness of insecurity of footing. It needs not to describe to those who have experienced the sensation, what is the effect on the nerves of a sudden sense of insecurity in such a position. Kate Tollmache knew perfectly well that on any part of so steep a slope, a slip, involving complete loss of footing, must result in a roll the whole way down into the valley below; but with her footing firm on the rough, shaggy grass of the lower part of the hill, this certainty remained a mere piece of abstract knowledge, unproductive of any practical consequences. Now, the case was very different. She not only knew, but felt the danger. The bare hillside, hard, smooth, and slippery, rose steep before her, without a single tuft to grasp in case of need. Far below lay the level ground of the valley, and at almost every step her feet seemed more inclined to slip from under her, and the muscular effort to maintain her hold more severe. A feeling of dread came over her, which she had hard work to master. She felt that she dared not look back, and was conscious of a dangerous nervous tremor, which inclined her rather to struggle wildly forward than to press steadily but quietly onward.

At last, a more decided slip than any she had yet made caused her to utter a faint exclamation. Lionel Lawrence instantly passed his arm round her, and digging his heel fiercely into the turf, stopped her sliding foot with his own, while his strong clasp seemed to be lifting her weight off her own feet.

"Oh! Mr. Lawrence," she gasped, "my boots won't hold."

"I daresay you have been too much on the rocks," he replied. "Probably the nails are worn too smooth. Stand quiet for a moment, and recover your breath. Don't look back. We are not very far from the top. Try not to feel alarmed. I can get you up quite well if you can keep quiet, and don't struggle."

His calm, almost careless tone, reassured her, and she was not in a position to see how pale, yet firmly set his own face was. After a moment's breathing space, they started forward once more.

"Now, be sure you do not allow yourself to struggle in the least. If you slip, trust to me," the rector said. "If you struggle, you may chance to knock my feet from under me, as well as to lose your own footing."

Fortunately for Kate Tollmache, her nerves were equal to the occasion, or she had never reached the summit of the hill. More than once her footing gave way entirely, and not even the great muscular strength of her companion could have saved her, but for the quiet self-command which kept her perfectly firm and steady. The distance was not very great, but it was one continued and tremendous strain the whole way; and when at last she felt the slope beginning to grow easier under her feet, and, in a few moments more, the sharp invigorating sea breeze greeting her over the summit, she was thoroughly exhausted, and faint and giddy with the violent throbbing of her somewhat overtaxed heart.

"You are quite safe now," Lionel Lawrence said.

His voice was low and tremulous, and he still kept his arm round her.

Something—perhaps it was the tone of his voice, perhaps it was some subtle electric current—acted on her like a powerful tonic, added to the natural dislike of a woman of her type to any unnecessary fuss over an incident of such a nature. She straightened herself up, and drew a deep breath.

"I shall be all right in a moment," she said still a little breathlessly, "only the strain was rather severe."

"More than rather," he replied, in a still lower tone. "Most women would have settled the matter by fainting. Your heart is still throbbing very heavily. Lean against me for a moment."

His arm was still round her. On the steep hill-side it had seemed to grasp and support her like a band of steel. Now its touch had changed its character to something very like a caress. He drew her gently closer to him as he spoke, and involuntarily, as she took one of those long, deep breaths, which are such a welcome relief after so sharp a struggle, her head rested against his shoulder. That was a test beyond his powers of self-control. His clasp tightened round her, and bending down, he pressed his lips to hers. Whatever progress Kate Tollmache had previously made toward recovery, this most unexpected restorative acted like a charm. She started away from the rector's side, uttering some confused, unintelligible phrase, and turning instinctively, for she was hardly conscious that she did so, in the direction of the bay, towards which the yacht was already making her way in the

far distance, she walked rapidly down the shoulder of the hill towards a broad shelving slope, which swept down to the sands at some little distance. Alas, for the magnificent prospect they had come so far and toiled so manfully to admire! Its glories did not suffice to secure it one single passing glance. In place of the glittering sea stretching far away, deep blue in the clear autumn air, the picturesque coast line, and richly-hued inland landscape, a dull, colourless, far-reaching plain might just as well have been spread out before them.

Lionel Lawrence stood hesitating for a moment, turning very pale, and gnawing his lip fiercely. Then he strode hastily after the rapidly retreating form of his companion. The situation was embarrassing, but what could he do? He could not turn in the opposite direction, and leave her there alone on the bare hill, to make her way as best she might to the bay, and account as she chose to her father for her forsaken condition; to say nothing of the unromantic but important consideration, that in a knapsack strapped to his back was secured the whole of their available resources in the way of luncheon, a refreshment of which, after the severe fatigue and excitement she had undergone, she would certainly stand sorely in need, long before the arrival of the yacht,—an event which his practised eye enabled him to determine as being yet some two hours or more distant. Moreover, come what might, some explanation over his conduct was clearly inevitable. There was no escape from that necessity, since he had thus rashly placed himself in a position from which there was no retreat. And the sooner

that explanation was got over, the pleasanter, or rather, perhaps, the less unpleasant for both.

Some such train of ideas passed rapidly through his mind during his brief hesitation, and clenched his resolution. With all the energy of a naturally determined character, having resolved, he straightway set about seeking the best means of carrying his resolution into effect, and almost instantly descried them in physical circumstances. Some five or six hundred yards before them, a rough, loosely built stone wall, some five feet in height, stretched completely across their route, unbroken by any gateway. There Miss Tollmache would be forced to pause, and accept his aid; and there and then should be said what he had to say.

Meanwhile they walked on rapidly, in unbroken silence; he keeping beside her at a few paces' distance. He saw her scan the whole length of the wall as they approached it, but she saw there was no escape, and walked firmly and quietly up to it. Then he resolutely made a halt.

"Before we go any further, Miss Tollmache," he said, "you must grant me a few words. I am placed in a painful dilemma," he went on, "by my own folly; for in order to convince you that my unguarded action was not a gross insult, I am forced to offer an explanation, which I fear will appear to you as unwarranted a liberty as that action itself."

He paused for a moment, but she made no reply. She did not even look at him. She only stood quietly waiting, with her eyes downcast, evidently prepared calmly to hear what he had to say; but in

what spirit, it would have been difficult to divine. After a moment's silence he went on, speaking in a low tone, which was steady, but had a ring of plaintive sadness in it.

"I think you will do me the justice to allow that I have never hitherto failed, throughout the whole period of our acquaintance, to treat you with the deference and respect due to one occupying a social position so different from my own. As long as this is the case, I cannot think any woman has a right to feel in any way aggrieved if a man chooses to make her the object of his deepest devotion, the earthly centre of all his purest, holiest feelings; to enshrine her in his inmost soul as his ideal of all he most loves and worships. Surely so long as he betrays no such sentiments, makes no effort to pass the barrier which social rank places between him and her, he is guilty of no conduct which she has a right to resent?"

He paused, as if for a reply, but none came.

"Will you not tell me, Miss Tollmache, whether you think me justified in holding this opinion?"

"Most undoubtedly," she replied, in a low but perfectly distinct voice.

"Then," he said, "I have nothing to do beyond craving most earnestly and sincerely your forgiveness for having been momentarily betrayed into forgetfulness of fitting reticence. How long you have been to me all—more than all I have described, it is not for me to say; but never for a moment did I contemplate any avowal of such sentiments. I can only plead as excuse for my conduct the peculiar circumstances of the case. I hardly know if you

were yourself aware of the extent of the danger you had just escaped. I had felt for what seemed an eternity that your very life, perhaps, hung upon my strength and endurance of muscle, and had seen you exhibit a cool courage and self-control which, in a woman, I admire beyond expression. I know that such characteristics are always accompanied by generosity, therefore I have no fear but that you will grant the forgiveness I crave, for having been betrayed into momentary self-forgetfulness by the sudden revulsion of feeling caused by the consciousness that the danger was past, that you were safe, and that I had been allowed the happiness of being the means of saving you from, at the very least, a most dangerous accident. We can never, of course, again resume our old relations; but you will forgive me, Miss Tollmache, will you not? And, believe me, you shall never again have cause to feel that I have for a moment forgotten that the high rank and wealth which—"

A sudden exclamation cut short his harangue. With a vehement gesture Kate Tollmache turned suddenly away, and walking a few steps forward, stood leaning on the wall, with her hands tightly clenched together, gazing out on the sea with marks of strong agitation on her features.

Lionel Lawrence stood looking at her for a few moments in startled surprise. He had been fully prepared for a manifestation of haughty displeasure, but he had no doubt of pardon, although it might be perhaps a somewhat coldly dignified one. Kate Tollmache was very far from being one of those small-souled women who delight in magnifying a

momentary indiscretion on the part of a man into an offence of unpardonable magnitude. But for such a manifestation of violently excited feeling he was wholly unprepared, and he was equally unable to divine its cause. He had, in fact, been so deeply absorbed in considering the subject from that side which possessed such an all engrossing interest for himself, that he had totally forgotten the possibility of its having other aspects which he had never contemplated.

The conclusion at which he finally arrived was, that something in his words had in some way annoyed her, and under this impression he advanced towards her.

"Miss Tollmache, I fear I have inadvertently said something which has pained you. For that, as well as all else, forgive me, I implore you."

"Oh, don't talk of forgiveness!" she exclaimed, turning towards him with the same vehemence of action. "Is such a declaration as yours anything to need forgiveness? I could forgive you anything more easily than that perpetual thrusting in my face of my great calamity."

"Your great calamity?"

"Yes. I say it advisedly—rank and wealth. Ever since I was a child those two words have sounded to me like the clanking of the fetters which bound me."

He smiled a sad smile. "I should have thought," he said, "their fettering power was rather for others than for yourself."

"Yes," she bitterly replied, "that is what people always think. As if they were priceless boons, sufficient by themselves alone to ensure perfect

happiness, instead of lures to attract all that is base and contemptible. How young do you suppose I began to learn the true value of the greater part of the affection and loving attentions so lavishly bestowed upon me? But I think I learned it more from the care with which those whose friendship and affection I should really have valued held aloof, and avoided paying any court to me, than from watching the tactics of those who offered perpetual homage to all the varied perfections of which they discoursed so eloquently. Heavens—" she went on, with rapidly increasing vehemence, and an angry stamp of her foot on the turf, as a host of bitter remembrances came crowding into her mind, "it makes me furious when people talk in such a strain! I don't see why it need be perpetually flaunted in my face, if my birth and fortune are to stand for ever between me and—"

Here her speech shared the fate of Lionel Lawrence's pleadings for pardon. Though in no way interrupted by him, it came to an abrupt halt, and a crimson flush spread over her face. It may have been instinct, it may have been a sudden flash of expression which crossed her listener's face, or both, which sounded a warning of danger. But certainly a quick perception darted into her mind, that in the momentary forgetfulness of her burst of impassioned vehemence, she was landing herself in a somewhat awkward admission.

Her embarrassment and confusion finished the sentence for Lionel Lawrence almost more conclusively than words could have done; and for a moment he felt too dizzy with a whirl of conflicting

feelings to be able to speak. When a man has, for years, schooled himself into quiet acceptance of an apparently inevitable, but by no means specially attractive destiny, the first bare suggestion of a merely possible alternative, rends even the firmest crust of calm endurance with a mighty volcanic force.

Kate Tollmache was the first to recover herself. "We had better say no more on this subject, Mr. Lawrence," she said gently. "I cannot tell you how much I am pained by what I have heard. But rest assured that whatever forgiveness you really need is most heartily and fully yours, and that you will always have my best wishes for your happiness."

This appropriate little speech she delivered in a manner which would have charmed the heart of Lady Clanraven, and could she but have turned away and pursued her walk towards the bay, the propriety of the scene would have been complete. But, alas, inanimate nature has terribly little sympathy with the exigencies of social requirements! That unlucky wall stood cold and immovable, barring her further progress. She could not turn and walk back up the hill, and she certainly could not get over the wall without the rector's aid. It is not perhaps too much to say, that a roughly built stone wall was an important factor in the future shaping of two lives.

Her words restored her companion's self-possession. "One moment, Miss Tollmache," he said. "I thank you sincerely for your kind words; but now I have one thing more to beg."

"What is that?"

"The end of your unfinished sentence."

"Oh, no. It is needless. I was speaking more vehemently than I should have done."

"You were speaking as you felt," he replied, with vehemence nearly as great as she herself had shown. "I know it, I feel it, Miss Tollmache. Kate, I have told you all freely and frankly! Have I not a right to ask equal frankness from yourself? Am I to be repaid for an honest confession by being left in the cruellest suspense? You will not be so ungenerous. Finish your sentence, I implore you, and either crush at once, or confirm the wild hope your words have raised."

He paused, but she still stood silent. He watched her for a moment, then he gently took her hand. She did not withdraw it.

"Tell me," he said, in a low, pleading tone, tremulous with deep feeling, "if your birth and fortune are to stand for ever between you and—what?"

"Between me and all chance of happiness," she said, in a voice a little above a whisper.

"No, a thousand times no, my darling!" he exclaimed, clasping her in his arms. "Not a word," he added, stopping some incoherent expression with another kiss. "I know it—I understand it all. Do you think I could have learned to love, to worship you as I do, had I not learned first to read your true-hearted noble nature, and to know how small a value you place on all which the world so highly prizes? I had never dared to hope I might win your love, but right well I know that that priceless treasure once mine, I, humbly born, and all but fortuneless, can give you that which, in

your eyes, has a value far beyond all the glitter and show of rank and wealth. Oh, Kate, Kate! love has swept away all barriers. My beautiful darling! you and I are one now—one in heart and soul—for as long as life shall last."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PATRICIAN PERPLEXITIES.

"NOW for this wall," said Lionel Lawrence. "May the blessing of heaven rest upon its ancient structure!" he added, as though recognising the important part it had played in the occurrences of the last half-hour. "But it is by no means easy to find a safe place to get over it."

He found a fitting spot, however, at last, managing it easily enough himself, then gently lifting Kate down from the somewhat shaky summit, and bestowing a passing kiss upon her as he placed her on the ground.

"Look," he said, "there is the yacht in the offing. With the wind where it is, she must tack again before she can get into the bay. We have more than an hour yet. Sit down here under shelter of the wall, and rest, and have some luncheon. You must be both tired and hungry."

"I was. I don't feel now as if I should ever be hungry again."

"Nectar and ambrosia! But oh, my dearest, the

hard common-place realities of life tread close upon its moments of most ideal bliss. There is the yacht stealing quietly in towards the bay, and there, my Kate, is—your father!"

"And what of that?"

"What will he say to this?"

"Shrug his shoulders, and say it is just like Kate," she replied, with a slight touch of hardness in her voice. Then, as if conscious her tone and manner might suggest more than she was inclined, in the first half-hour of her engagement, to reveal, she hastily added—"He never has opposed me in anything, and I do not believe he ever would. Besides, you are a great favourite."

"As an acquaintance, yes, perhaps. But as a son-in-law? He does not look at these subjects in the light which you do, Kate. He does not dig to find out on what foundations social traditions rest. He accepts them as they are, as things which ought to be maintained,—well, because they ought. That is about it."

"And therefore he is sufficiently conscious of the weakness of his position never to enter the lists with me. Never fear. Perhaps he may not take quite kindly to the idea at first, but I will talk to him, and you will see he will soon come round."

"It is not, looking at all the circumstances, a very pleasant position for me, Kate."

"Are you beginning to be afraid what people will say?"

"Not I. They may say what they please for me. But what your father may think is a different matter."

"I will undertake for that," she answered, and then she changed the subject.

In that short half-hour a veil had suddenly been torn from her eyes, and new light had given so changed an aspect to many things, that she felt somewhat bewildered. True deep love of any sort had been hitherto but an empty name for her; and failing any personal acquaintance with the same, she had accepted, as best she might, her father's easy careless fondness, and the mild affection of a few friends and relatives, hardly conscious herself of the cause of the strange sensations of loneliness and sadness which sometimes oppressed her heavily. Many a woman would have found perfect happiness and contentment in such a lot. Those women who are the good children of the nursery, the pet pupils of the school-room, the sweet amiable girls of society—who never give their parents any trouble, but obediently bestow themselves, with a due amount of insipid affection, on the model young men who offer their limpid devotion, and become pattern wives and the mothers of a fresh generation of mild excellence. But for Kate Tollmache the case had been very different. Her deep passionate nature had needed stronger sustenance—a more bracing atmosphere; and failing to find it, had lain half dormant under a crust of cold reserve, which had increased the evil, by rendering her unattractive to many gentle spirits, in whom she would have found much to attract her, had she not unconsciously repelled them. Now, in a single moment, a full perception dawned upon her of a change, which, all unconsciously to herself, had been going

on within her for some time. She felt the depth, the fulness of the unselfish devotion which she herself had aroused in the very man, of all men she knew, for whom she had the highest respect and regard. And the consciousness came like a burst of warm sunshine on frozen ground.

Small wonder if, in the first moments of this change, she felt confused and bewildered, inclined to revel in an intoxicating sense of bliss, undisturbed by any distinct sensation. But the reference to her father had, in a different sense from that in her lover's thoughts, brought the real and ideal together with a shock. In the light of a deep love, she saw his true character more clearly than she had ever done before,—the indolent selfishness which was at the bottom of his easy good nature; the languid interest in anything which did not personally affect his own comfort; and when she spoke of his never having opposed her, it was with a half bitter feeling that if now she carried her point with ease, it would not be owing to any strong affection leading him to prefer her happiness to any wishes of his own, but rather to disinclination to take any decided steps about a matter which it would be less trouble to leave to its own course,

She turned, however, resolutely away from such thoughts. Why should they cast even a faint shadow over the first blissful moments of her newfound happiness? It would be close on an hour yet before the yacht cast anchor in the bay, and a brisk walk of a quarter of an hour would take them down to the beach. So there, on the sunny slope of the hill, they sat, sheltered by the old wall from the

sharp autumn breeze, drinking deep draughts of a joy which had been hitherto but an empty name for each. It is not often that, for those who have passed the unreflecting boy and girl stage of existence, such moments are wholly unclouded by anxious thoughts or wise reflections. "Of course," says Angelina to herself most sagely, "one cannot expect to find absolutely perfect happiness in marriage—there must be some drawbacks; but I am sure I have every reasonable chance of happiness with Edwin,"—Edwin the while reflecting that it would be useless for any man to expect to find a woman in all points equal to his ideal, but that he is certain his Angelina will make an excellent wife, and that he is really a fortunate man. And thus both enjoy a sort of modified temperate bliss, much enhanced by a self-pleasing consciousness of having manifested much prudent sagacity and sound judgment, and of being prepared to manifest in the future much admirable unselfishness and praiseworthy mutual forbearance. Doubtless their chances are good of running smoothly side by side along the road of life, with very little shaking and jolting; but never for them shall that great mystery be unveiled—"No more twain, but one flesh."

No such wise reflections crossed the thoughts of Lionel Lawrence or Kate Tollmache. Each had found in the other the one man and the one woman who existed for each. That great discovery comprehended all, and swept away with its mighty force all artificial distinctions of grade and class. Had they parted then, never to meet again on this side the grave, they would have been more

thoroughly one than many a happy couple after long years of married life. Few perhaps will endorse the sentiment; but there are few who can estimate such sensations as those produced by bathing in the Dead Sea, or drinking the water of the Nile, simply because the opportunity of experiencing those sensations is not granted to them.

At last they saw the yacht cast anchor. "We must go, Kate, now," the rector said; "we shall only just about get down to the beach by the time the boat comes ashore, and we have not much more light than we shall want."

They both rose, somewhat reluctantly. Lionel picked up Kate's hat, which was lying on the ground, as he did so, but he did not put it on. He folded her closely in his arms for a moment, murmuring—"Are you my own wee darling?" as he gently smoothed her soft brown hair. It seemed a somewhat inappropriate phrase, for Kate Tollmache was by no means a very diminutive woman; but size is comparative, and as Lionel Lawrence stood a good deal over six feet, the appellation was not so unsuitable, from his point of view.

Kate made no reply, and with his disengaged hand he raised her face, looked fondly into her eyes for a moment, and then kissed her. Words were not very necessary between them. The caressing motion with which her head rested for a moment against his shoulder told him all; even how dear to the woman's heart of the stately self-reliant heiress was his assumption of a man's true superiority, a shielding protecting tenderness, which

would watch over, even while it worshipped with reverential devotion.

And all this while Mr. Tollmache had been walking up and down the deck of the yacht, sweeping the hill side with his glass in a hopelessly wrong direction, and wondering what on earth could have become of the two. He was almost ashore, and they actually on the beach, before he saw them.

"Why, where on earth have you been?" he exclaimed. "I have been looking all over the hill with the glass, and could not make you out anywhere."

"Heaven be praised," muttered Lionel, in a low tone. "We were resting under shelter of the wall, up there, while Miss Tollmache had some luncheon," he replied.

"And what sort of a view did you get from the top of the hill? Is it worth the walk, Kate?"

"Quite," she replied, in some little confusion; and the rector came instantly to the rescue.

"Unfortunately, after all," he said, "we did not see much of it. We missed the right road, and instead of an easy ascent, had a very steep and really dangerous climb; so that Miss Tollmache was in no state when we reached the top to stay long in the cold wind there is up there. We were obliged to look out at once for a more sheltered resting place."

"Precious glad I didn't go with you," was all Mr. Tollmache's comment. "And now come along at once. We have only just about time to get back. It took us longer to get here than I expected."

"And will take us longer still to get back,"

Lawrence replied. "I don't quite like the look of the weather."

"There is a change coming, I think. But it will let us go home."

They were soon on board, and then Kate was left to her own reflections, while the two men went forward to smoke. She sat comfortably wrapped up in a corner, watching the dancing waves, and but little conscious of the lapse of time, as her thoughts, almost involuntarily, strayed over that chapter of her life's history which seemed to have closed that day. It had not appeared a very brilliant chapter during its progress, but oh, how cold and cheerless it looked now, in the blaze of light and sunshine with which its successor had so unexpectedly opened! Small wonder that she had sometimes felt lonely and sad! The marvel now was only that she had not felt ten times more so.

Reminiscences and anticipations soon became strangely mingled up in a deep reverie, and she gave a great start, when a voice said close beside her,—

"Are you sure you are not cold?"

"No,—yes. I don't know. I believe I am, a little. Why, how the day has changed!" and she roused herself and looked round. The sun was gone; the sea was rolling in heavy and leaden, the sky was dull and threatening, and the wind had risen a good deal.

"Yes," Lionel answered. "I don't like the look of it. There is a gale coming. I only hope we may get in first. I wish we were well round that point."

His tone was anxious. She looked at him in surprise.

"You, nervous?" she said.

His eyes turned upon her, and his words were hardly necessary. "A little—now, perhaps. I should not be if you were ashore. I don't quite trust that skipper or his man. But let me wrap you well up. We shall get a good deal of spray presently."

He carefully wrapped a thick cloak round her; then her father came sauntering up, and they sat talking for a while. The freshening breeze seemed to lull again, but the sky was heavily clouded; and by the time they were off the point, which sheltered the bay and town from the north, the light was failing fast. A little off the point lay a small island, hardly more than a long strip of jagged broken rock; and it was the channel between that island and the point, which was then filling the rector's mind with anxious thoughts, and making him long fervently for another hour of clear daylight, for it was at best but an awkward passage, and with the wind in its present quarter, only to be attempted, because, with so small a craft, it would have been nothing short of madness to endeavour to keep to seaward of the island, and enter the bay from the southern side. As he said, he had little faith in the crew; but then he had little acquaintance himself with the coast, still less with the qualities and capabilities of the yacht. Altogether, the position was certainly not a reassuring one for a man weighted with all the knowledge of a thoroughly practised seaman, and with his lady-love on board.

They had just got well within the channel, and were hugging the shore rather closely, when the very thing happened which Lionel Lawrence had all along anticipated. A sudden gust, the forerunner of the gathering gale, came sweeping across the water, and struck the yacht sharply. She reeled and staggered in a way which brought a quick perception of danger even to Kate Tollmache's nautical inexperience, and seemed for a moment to be almost drifting, straight towards the perilously close mass of seething foam which marked the position of the low scattered rocks clustered round the point, while the skipper was struggling with the flapping sail. With a low muttered exclamation, Lionel Lawrence started up, and dashing aside with one stroke of his arm the incompetent steersman, took his place. The effect was magical. In an instant the little craft steadied, righted herself, and answering gallantly to her helm, shaved past the farthest outlying ridge of rock so closely, that Kate involuntarily shuddered, and was soon plunging boldly forward in deep water.

But the danger was by no means past. The narrow channel, the fading light, and the oft-recurring fitful gusts of wind were an awkward combination. Kate, from her sheltered corner, could watch her stalwart lover unmolested. He had no eyes for her, wherever his thoughts may have been. She divined the amount of peril, far more from his pale set face and the stern knitting of his brow, as he gazed steadily into the gloom before them, than from any personal perception of the same. For some three-quarters of an hour

he never moved, and again and again the yacht seemed to be plunging almost within the foam; but by the end of that time, the lights in the town began to rise clear before them, and Kate felt they were riding in calmer water.

Then Lionel gave up his post, and came back to Kate's side. He threw himself down on the deck with a heavy sigh; and then for the first time it occurred to her to look out for her father, who had been actively occupied with the sail, and was still keeping a look-out ahead. Kate quietly stretched out her hand, and as the rector grasped it, and hastily pressed a kiss upon it, she felt how he trembled.

"Was the danger very great?" she asked, in a low tone.

"It all depended on how she obeyed her helm, and I had not seen her tried severely enough to feel quite confident on that point."

"You are much shaken."

"Yes, you little witch, that is your fault. Do you think I could forget for a moment that you were here; otherwise I should rather have enjoyed it. That is the way with you women; you make our muscles steel for the moment, and then comes the reaction."

"Have you saved my life twice to-day?"

He had no chance to reply, for Mr. Tollmache came up at the moment.

"That was stiff work, Lawrence?"

"Pretty fair; but she is a good little craft. She behaved well."

"Yes, luckily for us, she behaved better than her

crew. This break in the weather will put an end to yachting for this year, so it does not much matter; but it would be the last time I went out with them."

They were very soon alongside the little pier.

"Go on with Kate, will you?" Mr. Tollmache said. "I have one or two directions to give, and she must be very wet."

Lionel obeyed.

"Am I to speak to your father, Kate?" he asked, as soon as they were clear of the few loungers on the pier. "It must be done to-night, dear. I cannot remain one moment longer his guest without his knowing all."

"No," she promptly answered. "I will tell him. I know his ways."

"And if he will not consent?"

"He will," she confidently replied; "soon, if not instantly."

And again her conviction was based on the somewhat bitter calculation which course her father was likely to consider would involve least trouble and disturbance to himself.

That was by no means a pleasant evening to Lionel Lawrence. The occurrences of the afternoon had infused even a greater amount of cordiality than usual into Mr. Tollmache's manner, and his guest's sensations were just those inevitable under the circumstances to every honourable man. He was very glad to escape early, under some flimsy pretext, and leave the coast clear for Kate. The door had hardly closed behind him, when Mr. Tollmache burst forth,—

"By Jove, Kate, that's the finest fellow I ever saw! I believe he saved all our lives this afternoon. He is not quite himself though, I see. It's taken out of him, and small wonder!"

Mr. Tollmache had all an Englishman's inborn admiration for pluck and muscle; but Kate's heart began to beat faster now the important moment was come. It by no means followed, certainly, that that admiration might overmaster all other considerations in respect of the announcement about to be made.

"You never seem tired of sounding his praises, father," she somewhat Jesuitically began.

"No more would you be, if you knew what you owe to him to-day. But women don't understand these things, of course."

"I think I do understand," she replied, determining to come to the point at once, and grapple as best she might afterwards with the astonishment she might arouse. But one thing I know. He intends to ask you for a reward."

"What do you mean?"

"He means to ask you for your daughter!"

"Kate!"

It was all Mr. Tollmache could utter. He sat staring at his daughter with an expression of such stupefied astonishment, that she could not but laugh.

"It is even so," she continued. "I gave him leave to-day to make the demand."

Mr. Tollmache plunged his hands in his pockets, and began to look profoundly contemplative.

"My dear girl," he said, "you've fairly knocked

the ground from under me. I never dreamed of the possibility of such an idea entering either of your heads. Lawrence had no business—"

"Stay, father, you must not condemn him. He never for one moment contemplated such a step, until an accident brought the truth to light." Then she briefly told him what had happened. "What could any honourable man do then, save carry it through?" she added.

"Humph! Well, but do you really mean that you care for him? That you wish to marry him?"

"I do. I will never marry any one else," she firmly replied.

"But, my dear Kate, consider! His position. His father was in trade!"

"So, I have no doubt, were my ancestors at some more remote date. It is only a case of time."

"Well, yes, that may be true. I am not aware, though, that any of either of my ancestors or your mother's were ever in trade."

"Perhaps; but then you know one has four grandparents, sixteen great-grand-parents, and so on, *ad infinitum*, doubling the number each time; so there is soon abundant room for serious complications, and it is perhaps as well not to look into the matter too closely."

"Well, but his father. It is so close!"

"It is getting further off every day."

"But, my dear, what will the world say?"

"Whatever it likes, so far as I am concerned. I daresay its utterances will be characterised by the usual amount of truth and wisdom."

"I shall not dare to meet your aunt Gwendolyn!"

"Will that be an insupportable misfortune? She will not know whether to congratulate or condole with you; to lament over the family disgrace, or to rejoice in my being got well rid of!"

Mr. Tollmache was silent, and his daughter left him for a while to his meditations. It was not unadvisedly she had assumed such a tone. Had she spoken to her father of her own deep, passionate feelings, he would only have been amazed and puzzled; probably have remarked that he had no idea such a sharp practical girl as Kate could be so sentimental.

"Upon my word, Kate, I can't like the idea," he said, after a short silence.

His tone and manner implied that it was time to take up the matter a little more seriously. Ancestors, family position, and all the rest of the social *impedimenta* were evidently hard at work, with cumulative force.

"Now listen, father," she said gravely. "Can you find any objection to him personally? Is Mr. Lawrence not, by personal character, manner, habits, education, a man whose wife any woman might be glad to be?"

"Yes, undoubtedly. I always have said, and always shall say, he is one of the finest fellows I know."

"Then there is nothing against him, save want of social position?"

"Exactly. Think of all his relations!"

"I am not aware that he has many, and if he has, I am not going to marry them. But I was going to ask you if you remember how hard aunt Gwendolyn strove, in company with a host of other equally ad-

mirable mothers, to catch Mr. Congreive two seasons ago?"

"Well, what of that?"

"You know Mr. Congreive, therefore you know that he is ignorant, coarse, and vulgar-minded, and that he is not unfrequently known to get very drunk; also that his father was Congreive, of the firm of Congreive & Burton, upholsterers and house-decorators. But then this upholsterer left his son nearly a million of money; therefore Lady Lucy Grey was looked upon as a most fortunate girl when she captured him. You can draw the inference for yourself, father. I don't think it is one very creditable to our social estimate of the relative value of things. In point of position, Mr. Lawrence and Mr. Congreive stand on about the same level. Mr. Lawrence is highly educated, refined in manners and habits, honourable and upright. Mr. Congreive is ignorant, coarse, and dissipated; but then, he has nearly a million of money!"

"Oh well, yes. I grant you all that. In theory it is all very well, but in practice it is different."

"Very different, I should say, if one is to judge of the results of practice by the little disclosures which now and again burst upon us, causing us to look very virtuous and shocked, and to wonder how such things can possibly be. But now, father, be reasonable. You know in your heart I have made a wise choice, as far as my own prospects of happiness are concerned, and you know that I should never have married the sort of man who would have entirely satisfied you. Give your consent at once, and add the only thing wanted to make us both quite happy.

Get rid of your impracticable daughter," she added, with a smile; "and it is not too late for you to marry again yourself. You would have a wide field for choice."

"And cut off a handsome slice of your fortune?"

"Who cares about that?"

"Not you, I believe. But if I do consent, Kate, the settlements must be rigid."

"You will not easily make them too rigid to satisfy Mr. Lawrence. And now I am going to bed," she added, knowing that her point was won, "for I am very tired."

Mr. Tollmache sat meditating after his daughter left him for a long while. He could not dispute the correctness of Kate's view of things; but still he did not like it. Kate had not, however, miscalculated. There would of course be, as he expressed it to himself, "a great row" about the marriage, but at all that he could shrug his shoulders, and say, "Kate always has had, and always will have, her own way." Whereas, if he opposed it, the result would be a vast amount of daily recurring personal worry, annoyance, and trouble; and after all, she could not have made a marriage which would ensure him a companionship more thoroughly agreeable to himself. So rapidly did his considerations advance, that before he went to bed, the idea had flitted through his mind of a family party at Wycherley Court, Kate's suggestion of a second marriage for himself not being one which found much favour in his eyes.

Under these circumstances, he was prepared, by the following morning, to offer a gracious and cordial greeting to his intended son-in-law, although tinged

with just the faintest touch of stateliness; which cordiality Kate, in her secret soul, believed to be in no small measure owing to that lucky gale which had given her lover such an opportune chance of showing of what metal he was made.

Great was the surprise and triumphant pleasure of Miss Bradley when she received a letter from her cousin to say that he intended to be absent a week longer, as Mr. Tollmache pressed him to remain, and return to Monksford with Miss Tollmache and himself at the end of that time; and little did the good soul dream of all that announcement portended for herself, though Mrs. Corbett contrived, with her plain speaking, somewhat to turn the edge of her extreme satisfaction.

"I am sure I am glad to hear the rector is enjoying himself so much. I only hope it may not turn out a dangerous sort of enjoyment for him."

"I don't see how it can be that."

"Well, perhaps not. But, for my part, I should not have thought Mr. Lawrence an old enough man to be quite safe in the society of a fine, handsome-looking girl like Miss Tollmache, so entirely beyond his reach. And I shouldn't think, to look at her, she had much feeling. She's just the sort of woman who, I could fancy, would play with a man, without much regard to the consequences to him."

In Wales the winged hours sped on golden wnigs, though a more quiet, undemonstrative pair of lovers never contrived to avoid rendering themselves odious to every one else. Mr. Tollmache, having arrived at consent, was rapidly inclining onwards, through dwindling dissatisfaction and contentment

towards positive approbation. Lawrence was really such a fine fellow; and after all, when a thing was inevitable, it saved a great deal of unnecessary worry and trouble to make the best of it. Besides, if Kate had married such a fellow as Congreive, for instance, he might have had no end of trouble. He knew, which his daughter did not, that already Lady Lucy's father had been obliged to interfere more than once on his daughter's behalf since her marriage.

The week flew by; the last morning came, and Kate, making her way down to breakfast through a motley array of trunks and packages, blocking up all available resting places, found her lover standing on the hearth-rug, with an open letter in his hand.

"Oh, Lionel, what is it?" she asked, not needing to ask if anything was amiss.

He passed his arm round her, and kissed her anxious upturned face, as he replied,—

"Poor little Rose Playfair is gone—run away with Mr. Wycherley!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A STRICKEN HOUSE.

ALAS! it was even so. About one o'clock on the morning of the day preceding that fixed for the Tollmaches' return to Monksford, Doctor Playfair was woke by the sound of the night bell. He got up, and, opening the window, looked out to know what was wanted.

"Is that you, Playfair?" asked a voice from below, which seemed to him familiar, though at the moment he could not recall to whom it belonged, and through the darkness could only dimly discern the figure of a man standing at the door.

"Yes," he replied. "Who is it? What do you want?"

"It is I,—Smithson. Come down quickly and let me in."

"Humph, got some case he can't manage, I suppose," Doctor Playfair said to himself, as he hastily slipped on some clothes. He had not a very high opinion of his professional brother; or at least felt the importance of preserving always an attitude

of grave and dignified disapproval of his theories and methods.

He went softly down stairs and admitted his visitor. "What on earth is the matter?" he asked, in a somewhat startled tone, as the light of the small lamp he carried fell on Smithson's pale anxious face.

"Come into your consulting room. I want to speak to you."

"Killed some one, I'll be bound, with some of his vagaries," Doctor Playfair said to himself, as he led the way to the consulting room, "and wants me to help him through."

"Well, what is it?" he asked, as he closed the door, and put the lamp on the table.

"Playfair," asked Smithson abruptly, "where is your daughter?"

"Which daughter?"

"Rose."

"In her bed, and fast asleep probably."

"Would to God she were!" Smithson almost groaned. "She's gone!"

"Gone! Where?"

"Heaven knows! She's off with that French scoundrel!"

"It's a lie!" shouted the angry father.

"Go and see if she is in her bed."

Doctor Playfair caught up the lamp, and unceremoniously leaving his visitor in total darkness, rushed upstairs. The sole occupant of the room where the two girls slept was Alice, sleeping soundly. With a white, haggard, stricken face, the unhappy man staggered down stairs again, a

thousand trifling circumstances, unnoticed before, crowding into his mind.

"I can't believe it. Tell me all," he said, in a hoarse tone.

"I was dining in Willesbury," Smithson replied, with true kindness dashing into a concise account of his discovery, "and went to the station to catch the last train. I got there a little too soon, so was just in time to see the up train come in. I was standing close to the bookstall when Wycherley passed me. He did not notice me, but I saw him quite plainly. He went to the door of the ladies' room, and Rose immediately came out and joined him. They crossed the platform hastily, but I saw her face as plainly as I had seen his. They got into the train, and were off in another moment."

"And you did not interfere, knowing her to be under age?"

"My friend, I had no time. She did not come out until the last moment. They were in the train, and off, before I had time even to have reached the carriage."

With a groan, Doctor Playfair hid his face in his folded arms on the table.

"Come, Playfair," and Smithson laid his hand on his shoulder,—"you must not give way. Rouse yourself, and consider what is the best thing to do. Had you no suspicion of anything wrong?"

"Not the slightest. I thought Rose looking a little pale and out of spirits; but that scoundrel—he has never been near the place. I did not even know he was still in the neighbourhood. Oh, my child! my child!"

"Was she at home this evening?"

"Yes. She went up to bed at the usual time."

"Perhaps she may have left some note or explanation. Had you not better rouse Mrs. Playfair, and see?" he added, seeing that his listener was too much stunned by the shock to act with any promptness or decision.

Doctor Playfair obeyed mechanically, and after a short absence he returned, accompanied by his pale trembling wife, and holding in his hand a note which he gave to Smithson, merely saying, "It was pinned on her cushion." With some little difficulty Smithson deciphered the trembling unsteady lines.

"DEAR PAPA,—Don't be very angry; but I am gone away with Mr. Wycherley. Forgive me, and ask poor George to forgive me. I could not stay and face him. I know I have treated him very badly; but I ought never to have accepted him. Now I know what love is, I know I never loved him; but I did really think I did, and I am sure he would not like me to have stayed and married him, when all my heart was given to some one else. We are to be married to-morrow morning in London. I don't know how it is to be managed, but Victor says he can arrange it all, and then we shall go straight on to Paris, and I don't know where after that. Victor is going to take me to all sorts of places. And I know I shall be very happy; so forgive me, dear papa. I will write to you soon.—Your loving daughter ROSE."

A choking sensation rose in Smithson's throat as

he read the lines, which showed how implicitly the poor ignorant girl relied on the man to whom she had fearlessly trusted herself. Of what nature would be her awakening to the truth?

"You see," said Doctor Playfair, nervously clutching at a hope which in his secret soul he knew was a mockery, "it is not so bad as it might have been. Of course Rose has acted very wrongly; but as they are to be married at once—" He hesitated, with a sort of appealing look at Smithson.

"You'll follow at once," Smithson said, "and see that it is all right."

"Oh yes, of course. I'll go to London by the first train in the morning, and try and find them out."

"Then is there anything I can do for you? Can I see any of your patients for you?"

"Thank you; you are very kind. I can hardly think," answered the bewildered man. "Oh yes, there's Mrs. Crock, the clerk's wife. I promised to see her to-morrow; that is to-day. If you'd kindly call and say I am summoned to London on important business. I think that is all."

"Then I will leave you. If I can be of any use to you, Mrs. Playfair, you will send to me."

"Yes, thank you, you are very kind. There's only one thing. You won't say anything? Perhaps we could keep it quiet for a day or so, until we know more."

Poor woman! She could hardly credit that anyone in Monksford could hold his tongue when he had that to tell which would raise an ill report against a a neighbour. And already the cold shadow of the

bitter humiliation in store for her was beginning to creep over her.

"You may depend upon my silence," he said, sadly thinking of the slender chance thereby afforded, that Monksford would fail to find out, ere many hours had elapsed, that so exciting an event as an elopement had occurred within its precincts.

Then he went away, and husband and wife were left alone with their bitter sorrow, and the dire forebodings which each was striving to choke down, as spectres too horrible to be boldly faced. Doctor Playfair walked up and down the narrow room—his wife sat sobbing on the sofa.

"How can it have come about, Mary?" he asked at last.

"I cannot think."

"Has he been here?" he asked, almost sharply. He did not fully and entirely trust his wife.

"Certainly not. I never knew that Rose had even seen him, since that day, ever so long since, when we met him in the High Street. It's all come of that engagement to George Huddleston, I believe," she went on, wildly seeking for some plausible pretext for self-delusion, which might aid her already bitterly accusing conscience. "I never did like it, and I am sure Rose never really loved him. She only accepted him, poor darling, because she thought we wished it. And it's just that which has driven her to this. She hadn't the courage to face it out. She was always timid and gentle, poor child!"

"Hush, don't talk nonsense!" her husband answered, rather sharply. "The thing now is to find

out all we can. Go and call Alice. She may be able to tell us something."

Mrs. Playfair obeyed, and in a little time Alice came, sobbing and terrified.

"It isn't my fault, papa. I didn't know. And Rose always begged me not to say anything."

"Anything about what? Don't be frightened, my dear child. Tell me at once, for your sister's sake, all you know."

"I don't know anything, papa, only that Rose went on so strangely sometimes. She used to cry, and say she was sure she should never be married to George; and that she wished she had never accepted him."

"And was that what she begged you not to tell about?"

"Oh, no. That was about her being out at night."

"Out at night!" almost shrieked both the unhappy parents,—and Alice's sobs burst forth with fresh vehemence.

"Yes. I didn't think it was any harm. It was one night, soon after the ball, I first knew about it. I woke, and heard the clock strike twelve, and Rose hadn't come to bed; and just afterwards she came stealing into the room, with her thick shawl wrapped all round her, and I asked her wherever she'd been; and she said she'd been for a turn in the garden, because she was hot, and knew the fresh air would make her sleep better. And then she told me to be sure and say nothing about it, because mamma would scold her, she was so afraid of her taking cold. I never thought any more about it; but often

since then I've seen her steal out that way; but indeed I never thought there was any harm in it."

"No, my dear, no one can blame you," her father said kindly. "But can you tell us anything more?"

"I don't think so. Rose was very queer yesterday, and, oh yes, she sent George something."

"What?"

"I don't know. I found her in our room before tea. She was turning things over in her drawers, and I am sure she had been crying. And after tea I saw her speaking to Dick, who was just going home, and she gave him a little packet, and I heard her tell him to go round by The Hall, and leave it as he came to work this morning. And I did notice, in the evening, that she hadn't got her ring on."

That was the sum and substance of Alice's communication, and read by the light of the present discovery, they were sadly significant. There was nothing further to be done, but to prepare for Doctor Playfair's early start on his forlorn unpromising journey.

He was less to be commiserated on his chances for the day than his unhappy wife. It would be better to be rushing the whole day from place to place, making, even if it should prove so, fruitless inquiries among total strangers, amidst all the din and bustle of a crowded city, than to wait idly at home, surrounded by all the daily recurring routine of life, and dreading every moment to find that the terrible news had flown abroad, and was the topic of the day. With all a woman's sharpness, Mrs. Playfair avoided the first great risk of the matter being spread about. Dismissing Alice to her bed again, with orders to

make the room look as if Rose had risen and hastily dressed, she set stealthily to work to prepare everything herself for her husband, trying, poor woman, wife-like, to tempt him to eat, with some carefully prepared delicacy which he was fain to leave untasted. The first train left Monksford at seven o'clock. She let him out herself a quarter of an hour before that time, then put another cup and plate on the table, with all the appearance of a second person having breakfasted, and went back to her own room to bathe her tear-stained face, and try, as far as possible, to assume her ordinary appearance, almost sternly enjoining upon Alice to look as if nothing had happened.

When, therefore, she came down at her usual time, the explanation to the servants was easy enough. Doctor Playfair had been summoned unexpectedly to London during the night, and Miss Rose had taken the opportunity of going also. She had got breakfast for them herself, as she did not think it worth while ringing all the house up so early, just to disturb the children.

"Did you leave that parcel for Miss Rose at The Hall?" she asked the boy, in as careless a tone as she could assume.

"Yes, ma'am; but Mr. George weren't up."

"Never mind; that is all right." And then she went to the kitchen for her daily consultation with the cook. How hard it was to talk about joints of meat, and puddings, and consider whether scraps sufficient could not be hashed up for the day, to save the joint for to-morrow.

"Well, yes, ma'am, I think there might be enough,

if master and Miss Rose ain't coming back to-night to want supper."

She nearly broke down at that. When would her beautiful Rose want supper again in her father's house?

"I don't know whether Doctor Playfair will be back to-night or not," she managed to say; "but if he does come, he will have dined in London, and Miss Rose will certainly not be back for a day or two."

Then there was a complaint about a stopped drain in the scullery, and a wail about the badness of the last lot of coals to be listened to, while every nerve was on the stretch, listening for the inevitable ring which she knew would shortly announce George Huddlestone's arrival.

She was standing on the stairs when it came, and with quick thought she ran and opened the door herself, laying one finger on her lip, and pointing to the drawing-room. But with his coming, the first suspicion of something amiss began to creep about the house. The housemaid, coming to answer the bell, caught a glimpse of George's face as he entered the drawing-room, and forthwith confided to the cook that she believed there'd been some quarrel, and that was why Miss Rose had gone off that sudden-like way. Missis wasn't a bit like herself, and she was sure Miss Alice had been crying, and Mr. Huddlestone looked for all the world like a ghost.

"What does this mean?" George asked, with a white drawn face, the moment the drawing-room door was shut.

"O George! O George!" and she sat down and sobbed hysterically.

"What is it? What does this mean?" he asked impatiently. He was not unfeeling, but pain and dread made him sharp and stern. "Where is Rose? What is all this? Look here, at what I received this morning!"

He held out the parcel to her as he spoke. In it were collected all the trinkets, and smaller things he had given Rose. On the top lay a paper, on which was written—"Mamma will send you the larger things—forgive and forget. Rose."

"What is it? What does it mean?" he repeated, a little more gently. At the first moment, when Mrs. Playfair herself admitted him, and no Rose was visible, a dark suspicion of some underhand tampering had darted into his mind. But the wan wretched face of the poor mother had effectually banished that suspicion, though as yet no glimmering of the truth had dawned upon him.

For all her answer Mrs. Playfair handed him Rose's note. He read it in silence; then he staggered for a moment, and sank into a chair with a heavy groan. Some incoherent expression escaped him, in which Mrs. Playfair caught only the word "treachery."

"Don't, George, don't!" she exclaimed. "I can't bear it. She is my own child—my beautiful Rose! I cannot hear a word against her."

"Against her?" he said, hoarsely. "My beautiful Rosebud! poor darling! No—I was thinking of him!"

"He's a scoundrel, a mean heartless scoundrel.

But oh, George, he will marry her—he will surely marry her—at once?—You see what she says—"

George shuddered all over. "Where is Playfair?" he exclaimed.

"Gone to London. Pray God he may catch them."

George Huddlestone walked to the window, and stood looking out into the garden, where the last fallen autumn leaves were dismally littering the somewhat moss-grown weedy gravel walks, and the rough untrimmed lawn. It seemed as though it were but yesterday he had told his tale of love there, amidst the rustling lilac bushes—and now—But his thoughts were not for himself. He had suffered a cruel wrong, a grievous injury—and had woke all in a moment to the bitter consciousness that he had lavished the treasures of his honest manly love in vain—that he had received in return but a weak fondness, which had not been able to stand for a moment against the attractions of a showy exterior and superficial polish. But how could he think of that, when in the opposite scale lay the awful fate of the fair bright innocent girl, who had only been too weak and silly to prize an uncut gem above carefully polished paste? Never for one single moment did he believe that Victor Wycherley would marry the confiding victim whom he had lured from her home; and if her father did not succeed in overtaking them, what would be her fate? He gnawed his lip till the blood almost came, finding actual relief in physical pain from the mental torture which the thought caused him.

Mrs. Playfair's continued sobbing roused him at last. He could not but feel bitterly towards her.

Who could say how far her inconceivable folly had aided to bring about this sad catastrophe? But it was no time to add fresh weight to the terrible retributive blow which had fallen upon her. She looked so hopelessly crushed and broken, that, in the midst of his own sharp pain, a feeling of pity for her sprang up, urging him to try and find some faintly comforting words to say to her.

"We must try and hope that all may yet turn out less darkly than we fear," he said, tacitly allowing the dread which neither had distinctly allowed. "I would I had known in time, that I might have accompanied Doctor Playfair. I might have been of use to him, and I would give—I know not what I would not give—to know that she is safe! Mrs. Playfair, I can never forget how dearly I loved her. Poor child, if in any way I can be of service, you will, let me know, will you not?"

Mrs. Playfair's sobs only increased at his words. Of course she knew all was over between the two. If Rose had merely broken off her engagement to accept another offer, and then things had gone amiss, she would not have been without hope that a reconciliation might have been effected. But much as she would have staked on George Huddlestone's devotion, she was not crazed enough to hold him capable of ever marrying a girl who, while actually engaged to himself, had run away with another man, even if her father did succeed in finding and bringing her back with him. Still, George's distinct admission of the fact, seemed like a fresh stab to her bleeding heart, and she could only sob more violently.

"If we can only keep it quiet for a few days," she

interest in her. "It might be [illegible] up to some extent."

"Can you trust your servants?"

"Oh, they don't know," and then she told him of her little device.

"It was well thought of," he said. "I do not see how Smithson has seen them. It may be possible, even here. You may depend upon my doing all I can."

With that he went away—Mrs. Parker little dreaming how, at that very moment, while speaking so quietly, he had resolved on an act of most unselfish heroism. His first purpose in leaving the [illegible] had been to [illegible] home and make arrangements for leaving the place for a time. Now he walked quickly down to the mills, resolutely forcing himself to attend to business just as usual, in the hope of thus being able to prevent the venomous teeth and claws of [illegible] from finding, in the [illegible] who had so cruelly deceived him, fitting prey to rend and mangle.

Poor Mrs. Parker meanwhile again washed her tear-stained face, and then set out upon her morning rounds, trying to smile and look just as usual, while her heart throbbed at every moment with the dread that in every passing face she might read discovery of her terrible secret. She was safe enough for that morning, however, and had only once or twice to declare that she had a very bad cold. At last she got home, and then came the children's dinner, and her own and poor Alice's wretched attempts to eat and to look as usual. Fortunately, the weather was too unsettled for any question of the children going out, so when they had been despatched to the nursery.

she sat down quietly to work, with at least the blessed relief of freedom for the moment from all necessity for acting.

Every sound made Mrs. Playfair start, with mingled hope and dread that it might be some cautiously-worded telegram, which would at least put an end to suspense. Alas, poor woman! she had not yet drunk to the dregs the bitter cup which her own hands had helped to mix for her. Soon after two o'clock a note was brought to her from George Huddlestone,—

"I grieve to have to tell you," he wrote, "that all hope of concealment is at an end. It seems one of the porters at Willesbury, who knew them both, saw them, and he is some way connected or acquainted with Mrs. Tatnell's servants. I need say no more."

It was indeed enough. There was little need to tell the wretched woman what would be the result of that conjunction of circumstances. She seemed already to hear the rising clamour, and to see the rush hither and thither, to be the first to tell the news in some fresh quarter. And as she sat in stricken, helpless despair, the memory of all her own follies came crowding fast upon her,—her absurd elation—ridiculous assumptions—patronising airs—and offensive remarks. Would not a threefold revenge be taken for them all? and even sympathy and commiseration become an insult in the hands of those who had so many scores of petty spite to pay off?

She was sitting with the work, which her blinding tears would not let her continue, fallen idly in her lap, when the door quietly opened, and a soft rustle,

which was not that of Alice or one of the servants, made her start and look round. There stood Mrs. Huddlestone, her soft eyes and every feature of her kindly face expressing the truest and most heartfelt sympathy.

She softly closed the door, and coming forward as Mrs. Playfair hastily rose without a word, put her arm round her, and drew the poor, swollen, tear-blinded face down on her shoulder, holding her thus in an eloquent though silent embrace.

"Oh, Mrs. Huddlestone, my child, my poor child! It will kill me," sobbed the poor woman.

"My poor friend," she answered, honestly giving her in her sorrow a title she had never accorded in prosperity,—"you must not give up all hope."

"Oh, but even at the best, it is so terrible. Things look so different now! How could she do such a thing? And to treat your dear kind George so."

She did not see the quick spasm which crossed the mother's face. "George does not think of himself," she replied. "It was he who begged me to come. When he found all was known, he came at once and told me all, and begged me to come and try what I could do to comfort you. Alas! how can I do that? I can but tell you how my heart bleeds for you."

"But, oh, if her father does not find them, he will marry her,—surely he will marry her?"

"We can only hope and pray that God may watch over her, until we hear something more."

"Oh, but look at her note! See what she says."

Mrs. Huddlestone read the note. "There is comfort in that," she said, "whatever happens. It

shows that she went confiding in the honour and good faith of the man to whom she trusted herself."

That was all the consolation she could offer. But for long she sat with the trembling mourner, encouraging the overcharged heart to relieve itself, as only true-hearted sympathy can encourage it; and when at last she was forced to go, Mrs. Playfair threw her arms round her, exclaiming with a burst of tears,—

"Oh, how you heap coals of fire on my head! How mad I have been in my pride and folly, thinking Rose might do better than marry your noble George, and have you for a second mother! God forgive me. If my poor darling had had such a mother as you, this would never have happened."

"Hush! hush! none can say that. We look too much to the present moment, and we only know what is, not what might have been. In the light of a truer life than this of earth, we may perchance see that even such a stroke as this is a mercy to all on whom it falls. We shall know then what would have been, had this not happened."

"Poor thing! what have I done for her?" Mrs. Huddlestone said to herself as she left the house; little conscious, as such natures always are, how her very presence had seemed to soothe and strengthen the poor suffering woman. And then she hurried home, forgetting everything, now her task was accomplished, save her own darling George. He was saved,—and in time her heart would rejoice in that consciousness, but for the present she could think only of his bitter sorrow.

The weary hours rolled on, but no telegram came; and Mrs. Playfair, oscillating between hope and despair, said to herself at one moment that its absence was a hopeful sign, and the next felt sick at heart because it did not come. The servants knew, she was certain of that; but they were good to her. Nurse exerted herself to keep the children quiet and amused; and when the cook came to ask some trifling question, she trod softly, and spoke in a low tone, as people speak and tread when death is in the house.

Night came, and at last she was left alone, to wait and watch for her husband's coming. She heard the last train pass, and stood in the hall counting the moments until she might hear his footsteps. At last they sounded on the gravel walk, and she softly opened the door. There was little comfort for her in the haggard lined face on which the lamp light fell, as he entered the hall, and which seemed to have aged by years in twenty-four hours. Without a word she mechanically fastened the door, and followed him to the dining-room, where a needless supper was waiting. Doctor Playfair sank down in a chair with a groan.

"No trace!" she asked.

"Yes. But a trace worse than none. Oh, my poor child!"

"Tell me!" It was all she could gasp.

"Their appearance had excited notice, so I was able to trace them. They had been remarked at Charing Cross Station, from whence they had started with tickets for Paris."

"That is what Rose said."

"Yes. But the time, Mary. They started for Dover within two hours after they arrived in London. That gave no time for a marriage."

"Perhaps they were afraid of being traced, and would stop at Dover," she said, grasping at any straw in her wretchedness.

He shook his head. The Superintendent at Charing Cross was very kind. He telegraphed to Dover. They lunched there, and crossed by the afternoon boat.

There was a dead silence. The brief account was hopelessly complete. It told clearly how the promised marriage in London had been merely a blind, to lure the hapless girl into toils from which there was no escape. Alone in a foreign land, and entirely in his power, was Victor Wycherley a man likely to trouble himself about a ceremony which would only be to him a clog round his neck, involving probably troublesome complications in the future?

"Oh, Charles! Charles!" exclaimed the poor mother at last, and she threw herself into her husband's arms, and they wept together. The last sad consolation left to them. Rose had been their first child, and how proud they had been of her. Always remarkably pretty, even in infancy! how they had watched with delight her gradually expanding beauty, as she passed from childhood into girlhood,—and how they had welcomed her engagement, and rejoiced in the thought of the position the beautiful Mrs. George Huddlestone would hold! And now—what could they do but weep?

At last Mrs. Playfair roused herself, to persuade

her utterly fagged, worn-out husband to go to bed, and at least try to snatch a brief spell of the rest of which he stood so sorely in need. And soon all was darkness and silence, if not rest, in the sorely stricken house.

CHAPTER XXVI.

RIGID PHARISEES AND SYMPATHISING SINNERS.

THAT had been a rare field-day for the birds of prey in Monksford. It was just about midday that Mrs. Tatnell's housemaid ran upstairs, breathless with the news.

"Eloped with Mr. Wycherley!" exclaimed Mrs. Tatnell. "Is it possible? Are you sure, Sarah, it is true?"

"Quite sure, ma'am. The porter saw them himself get into the train, and he knows them both quite well by sight. And one of the porters here told him Doctor Playfair had gone off to London by the first train this morning, and he looked just awful. Isn't it dreadful to think of a young lady doing such a thing, ma'am? and engaged to another gentleman all the time!"

"It is a very sad instance of the terrible consequences of vanity and love of dress, Sarah," replied her mistress severely. She was always prompt at improving the occasion on these pregnant subjects with the lower classes. "And I am sure I hope you

will lay it well to heart. You see even young ladies, who have not so much temptation on these points as servants, may reap terrible consequences from indulging such propensities. Every one knows that Miss Playfair was very vain and dressy, in which, unhappily, she was rather encouraged than checked by her parents; and sorry though I am for her, I, for one must say I am not the least surprised. I hope you will lay this lesson well to heart, Sarah!"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Sarah demurely, thinking to herself the while, "Not so much temptation. Indeed! one would think, to hear the old cat talk, as young ladies and servants wasn't made of the same flesh and blood."

"And, Sarah," continued her mistress, "I think, if you'll bring me my bonnet and cloak, I'll go out for a little. It is going to keep fine, I think."

"Ay, I thought that would start you," said the handmaiden to herself, as she went in search of the required garments.

Far and wide the story spread, and Miss Bradley, rushing in breathless just before post time, scrawled a hasty account of the circumstances to her cousin. True, he would be at home the next evening; but there was no saying whom he might meet on the way. If she neglected her opportunities, they might be torn from her for ever.

Mr. Octavius Buller heard the news at his office, and was a little startled. Had he expressed his first sensations on hearing what had happened, they would have been expressed in the single word—"Already?" Betimes he remembered that the

fitting expression for the occasion would be surprise and consternation.

"Good God! you don't say so! Upon my soul, you've taken all the breath out of me! Are you sure it's true?"

"No doubt of it," replied Mr. Dyson, who had dropped in with the news. "It is a terrible affliction for our poor neighbours, who are however unquestionably very worldly. We must only hope that the mysterious dispensations of Providence may eventuate in a blessing."

Whether Mr. Buller at that moment considered the furtherance of his own aims to be an object of special care to a beneficent Providence does not appear; but he sat thinking deeply for some considerable time after Mr. Dyson left him; and when at last he left his office, his jaunty strut betokened internal satisfaction. The event was certainly somewhat premature; still, Mr. Wycherley was now hopelessly entangled in a net from which he was little likely to escape. That was itself a great point gained. The Tollmaches' tenancy had still some four years to run. No action in regard to the property was very likely to be taken until near the end of that period. Yes, on the whole, things looked well; and he had no special need to turn a reproachful glance on Providence.

He found his wife tearful, and almost excited.

"Oh, Octavius, have you heard the news?"

"About Rose Playfair? Yes."

"Oh, isn't it sad? I'm so sorry. She is such a sweet pretty girl."

"She has proved herself a very silly one."

"Of course she has. But I'm so sorry, poor girl! And, oh, Octavius! ain't you sorry she ever met him here?"

"Nonsense, Louisa, don't be a fool! What has that to do with it?"

"I don't know that it has anything to do with it; perhaps it would have happened just the same any way. Only I couldn't help remembering how pretty she looked that night, and how much he seemed to admire her; and it made me quite wretched to think their meeting here might have helped to bring it about."

"A lot of sentimental rubbish. One can't help these things. There's no use troubling one's self about them. I wish you'd work me some fresh slippers. These are nearly worn through already."

By good luck that was Mrs. Roberts's afternoon at home, and what a crowded drawing-room she had! The very demands upon the teapot seemed to tell of eager excitement having produced unusual thirst. Mr. Roberts did not believe in stores, being haunted by a nervous dread of servants procuring duplicate keys, and helping themselves to small quantities, not easily missed from large supplies; and the page had positively to be sent in breathless haste, by back streets, to Mr. Moss's shop for a fresh supply of tea.

Mrs. Corbett grew quite impatient under the chorus of ejaculations and interjections which resounded on all sides.

"Really," she exclaimed, "you good people quite provoke me. Hasn't the probability of some such catastrophe been evident enough for some time?

and here are you all as much astonished as if the most improbable thing had happened."

"That's quite true, certainly," replied Mrs. Roberts; "still, you know, somehow one often is surprised when a thing one knows is likely does happen; and one didn't expect anything as bad as this."

"Speak for yourself," replied Mrs. Corbett, with a slightly contemptuous glance round the circle of her less logically minded sisters. When I make up my mind a thing is likely to happen, I am never surprised when it comes to pass. And as for not expecting anything so bad, I can only say, ever since the ball I've been prepared for anything, and not least for this. I suppose you were all so much taken up with watching that little game with the Prince, that you didn't see how she and Mr. Wycherley were carrying on! But I was not so blind, I can assure you."

"What, under George Huddlestone's very nose?" ejaculated Mrs. Harrison.

"Of course. When a girl like that gets hold of a tame sheep, she isn't particular how she treats him. I fully expected something of this sort would be the end of it."

"You predict after the event, Mrs. Corbett," said Miss Witham, with a slight touch of malice. We all know how birds of prey can turn aside from the mangled carcase for a moment, to make jealous pecks at each other. "We heard nothing of this before the elopement."

"No, you did not, Miss Witham. You taught me caution. I had no mind to give you a chance to go and tell Mrs. Playfair all that was said as you did a

little while since. I hold that when we are chatting together in a friendly way like this, all that passes should be held confidential."

Miss Witham coloured angrily, and Mrs. Collier, scenting the breath of impending war, hastily interposed.

"Well, I am sure it is most sad and painful, and one must feel very sorry for the Playfairs, ridiculous though they have made themselves. And what an escape for poor George Huddlestone! But it really is most unpleasant. One must draw back a little from the acquaintance; yet he is the only doctor one can well employ."

"Why, bless me!" exclaimed Mrs. Corbett, "you don't think his physic will take less effect, do you, because his daughter has run away?"

"Of course not. How can you be so ridiculous? I was not thinking of myself. But when one has daughters, you know, one must be careful. I really should not feel justified in allowing Fanny and Laura to continue any acquaintance with Alice Playfair; and unfortunately they have been a good deal together of late, and my girls have rather a liking for her. It is most disagreeable; but of course one must do one's duty."

"I should think," said Miss Witham, "that Doctor Playfair can hardly fail to see that the only course for him is to leave the neighbourhood."

"He couldn't do it, you may be sure of that," said Mrs. Tatnell. "The practice isn't what it was in my poor dear husband's time. I don't suppose he could get anyone to buy it now. It has dwindled away sadly. I doubt it barely finds them food and clothing."

"And yet that ridiculous woman to come and give herself such airs as she has done lately among well-to-do people," Mrs. Corbett said. "Well, her pride has had a downfall this time, and no mistake."

"I wonder what Miss Tollmache will think now of her charming protégée?" suggested Miss Witham.

"Oh, of course she'll have to cut them all," said Mrs. Collier.

"I wouldn't answer for her doing that," put in Mrs. Corbett. "It's my opinion that Miss Tollmache is just the sort of person to like setting everyone else at defiance. I wouldn't wonder to see her upholding the girl."

"She can surely never do that," said Mrs. Roberts, a rather limp-minded woman, who always followed submissively where more energetic characters led the way; and on whom the possible contamination to unsuspecting innocence of any further association with the Playfairs had only dawned with Mrs. Collier's rigid maternal vigilance. "I am sure it is most unpleasant altogether. I quite agree with Mrs. Collier, one can't allow one's daughter to associate any longer with those girls. Of course Fanny and Laura are old enough to understand, but it is different with my Clara. She is just the same age as Lucy Playfair, and so fond of her. I must allow Lucy is a most sweet, innocent, engaging child, and what am I to do? One can't explain to a child. I do hope the Playfairs may see their way to leave the town."

"Well, upon my word," replied Mrs. Corbett, "I

think you are making all the difficulty for yourselves. Cut the family altogether, and send for Smithson. That's what I shall do. If some half-dozen or so of the best patients did that, they'd be forced to go away."

"Oh, my dear," remonstrated Mrs. Collier, "that is really going rather too far, I think. It would be too hard upon them. Besides, that might be all very well for you, but with daughters, you know, it is different. Smithson is not a married man. One has to be careful, and Fanny is not very strong. I often need medical advice for her."

"Well, of course everyone can please theirself. That's what I mean to do. Of course I am very sorry for them; but I don't see that one is bound to saddle oneself with perpetual unpleasantness and annoyance for anyone."

"Really," murmured Mrs. Roberts, "it would be the best thing to do. Only it seems so unkind."

In Mrs. Moss's drawing-room, where the business element of the town was wont to congregate occasionally, the changes were rung on much the same sort of sentiments, with only the difference that there Mrs. Dyson, laudibly following in the footsteps of her husband, strove mightily to improve the occasion, and managed to infuse into the discussion a high tone of moral feeling,—urging rather the religious obligation of holding aloof from all evil doers, however much you might meanwhile pray for their restoration to the paths of virtue, than the social necessities of the case.

By the time the early falling twilight drove them all home, there was quite a distinct feeling in the

town that they had all good right to feel aggrieved with the Playfairs, and to resent this infliction on themselves of undeserved annoyance. That any future manifestations of goodwill towards the family could only be regarded as a magnanimous display of Christian kindness and forbearance.

"On the weary night dawned wearier day," for the unhappy father and mother. What was to be done next? In the mind of each the truth stood forth very clearly. They could not *afford* to try and save their wilful child. She was but one of seven; and the six who had done no wrong had at least as strong a claim on parental care as the one on whom, for the moment, every thought was centred. The closest pinching and screwing barely sufficed to find food, clothing, and education for them all. What would be the result of the costly outlay which pursuit of the fugitive would involve? Simply a heavy addition to the slight burden of debt already incurred in preparations for the advantageous marriage on which so many hopes had been built. And such a debt would inevitably increase as it rolled along, curtailing income, while it constantly grew in magnitude, until at last it would fall with crushing weight on those who had, as it was, but a poor prospect of aught save a hard up-hill struggle with life.

At an early hour came Mr. Smithson, meeting George Huddlestone at the gate. Both could estimate correctly enough the terrible significance of that rapid journey straight to Paris. There was nothing more which Smithson could do, save offer professional aid.

"Can I do anything for you? see any of your patients to-day?" he asked.

"No, I think not, thank you. You are very kind. But you know," he added, with a ghastly attempt at a smile, "a man with . . . " he paused—"with six children to bring up," he hastily added, "cannot afford to indulge feelings."

It would not do. He had no doubt of Smithson's perfect good faith and honour. But it would not do to thrust a resident professional brother in that way among his patients. He must face the battle as best he might.

Mr. Smithson went his way, and then George Huudlestone urged instant pursuit.

"Where is the use?" replied Doctor Playfair gloomily. "Think yourself. Where would be the good of a Frenchman, who did not know a word of English, coming to London in pursuit of a daughter who had run away with an Englishman, who knew every hole and corner of the town? Besides, I tell you plainly, I can't afford it. I can't ruin all the rest for the sake of one. It would cost an enormous sum."

"Don't let that thought stand in the way for a moment!"

Dr. Playfair started up. "What, George? You help? No, no—a thousand times, no!"

George Huddlestone urged in vain, and at length went off to consult with his mother over what could be dene.

"He will not let us help him," he said. "The truth is, he is half stunned and stupified. Oh, mother, what can we do?"

"Only wait till the evening. The rector will be home to-day," she replied, thinking that she could understand the unhappy man's resolution not to incur what he was evidently convinced would be a fruitless obligation to her son.

And Mr. Smithson meanwhile, thinking sadly of the fair sweet face which, to tell the truth, had made a little rift in his own heart, was recollecting what the rector had once said to him, and reflecting, with a sort of vague hope that some good might come of it, that Miss Tollmache would be home that day.

With cold, pitiless regularity the routine of the day rolled on. The hour came when Doctor Playfair had to begin his professional work, and when his wife was forced to go out on her daily morning round. The petty worries and vexations of a doctor's life would not smoothe themselves away because his heart was almost breaking; nor would the narrow income stretch further, nor the hungry children need less food, because her quivering nerves shrank from the thought of meeting every human being.

With a slow step she crept down the street, avoiding even a glance at any passer-by, and dreading unspeakably her first stopping-place—the butcher's shop. Mrs. Cripps was a bluff loud-voiced woman, given to speaking her mind, and one with whom Mrs. Playfair had more than once had words, being plainly told by her that their custom was not worth such a fuss about the weight of a joint or the quantity of fat. Yet go there she must, more inevitably than to any other place. She dared not

send the cook. No servant would cater for her as she could do herself, who had to find the money for the meat which was so terribly dear.

With a beating heart she entered the shop. Cripps himself was busy cutting up meat. Mrs. Cripps was attending to some customers.

'Lor!" she said, in her loud voice, "if here isn't Mrs. Playfair. Cripps, come and attend to these ladies; I know Mrs. Playfair's time is precious. I was just speaking of you, ma'am. There's a joint here'll just suit you to a nicety, I'm sure. Step this way, ma'am, and look at it. I made Cripps put it aside for you."

She adroitly conveyed her, as she spoke, to a corner, somewhat hidden by a projecting angle of the wall. "There, ma'am! there's as nice a joint of mutton as you'll see any day; and I can let you have it very reasonable," she added, in a lower tone. "You see it's hung just as long as it's fit to, and we ain't likely to want it to-day, so I can let you have it as cheap as anything in the shop."

Mrs. Playfair looked at the meat, knew that the primest joint in the shop was being offered her at the price of the commonest, and began to have a glimmering perception that there were sympathising sinners as well as rigidly righteous Pharisees dwelling in Monksford.

"It is a beautiful piece of meat," she said.

"It is a nice piece, ma'am; I'm glad you like it. I'll send it round this moment; and you'll excuse me if I ask you to accept this sweetbread, ma'am. I'm sure you must often want some little thing to

tempt the doctor to eat after a hard day's work. I'll send it with the meat."

Mrs. Playfair tried to say something, but a sob choked the words.

"There, there, my dear; don't you give way," said the good woman, with the tears running down her own face. "My heart bleeds for you. I'm a rough woman, but I'm a mother myself. Hush, hush, my dear good soul, don't you sob that way! Come away into the back parlour, and sit down for a moment."

Drops of the precious balm of kindly feeling falling thus unexpectedly on her poor lacerated heart, had been more than poor Mrs. Playfair could stand. She was led, sobbing convulsively, into the back parlour.

"Come, come, my dear, quiet yourself a bit!" said Mrs. Cripps, clasping her hand in her own. "There, drink a glass of wine, it'll do you good. The poor, dear, sweet young lady, we've known from a child! She's been downright deceived and taken in, I'll answer for it. But be you sure of this, ma'am, whoever says a word against her, poor innocent lamb, in mine or Cripps' hearing, won't do it a second time. Cripps is that mad, I believe he'd brain that rascal with his cleaver if he could get at him. He can hardly speak of her without tears, poor darling! Never you think but there's hearts 'll feel for you, ma'am, though some as was jealous like enough of her sweet pretty face may say unkind things."

"God bless you!" was all poor Mrs. Playfair could falter, pressing the hard rough hand in her own.

"And now look here, ma'am, don't you go trapesing all up the High Street to them Mosses. They're a low lot, for all they hold their heads so high. If you want a bit of cheese or bacon, or any groceries, just let me get 'em for you for a bit. I've to send to Moss's most days myself, and I'll do it as reasonable for you as you could do yourself, and just make a note of it in the book. Then you needn't go walking about the town till the chatter's over a bit. No, no thanks, ma'am. Shouldn't we all try to help one another in trouble? Now I must go back to the shop. There's more in than Cripps can manage. Just you stay here till the place is clear, and then I'll come for you. Help yourself to another glass of wine, my dear. Do. It'll do you good."

Thus saying she hurried away, and poor Mrs. Playfair was left to shed the least bitter tears which had fallen from her eyes since this great calamity had burst upon her. The rough homely kindness of the genuine but unpolished nature had almost more restorative power than the more refined and educated gentleness of Mrs. Huddlestone.

Presently Mrs. Cripps returned.

"Now, ma'am, the shop 's empty for the moment," she said, "and you'll be sure and send to me if there is any little thing I can do for you. And don't you come bothering about the meat, ma'am. You trust to me, and you shall have no reason to regret it. And if you should hear any good news, there 'll be no one more thankful than me and Cripps, if you 'll let us hear it."

In the shop stood honest Cripps, with a suspicious

brightness in his eyes. He held out his hand, and grasped Mrs. Playfair's energetically.

"God bless you, ma'am," he said in a very choky voice; and then he turned abruptly away, and began chopping fiercely at a mighty piece of beef.

With not a lightened but a soothed heart, Mrs. Playfair returned home; and then, for the fiftieth time, she scanned poor Rose's brief note. Perhaps she might have written from Dover. In that case they would get the letter that evening, and she hoped against hope that it might come.

Doctor Playfair came in about five o'clock, haggard and worn, to find the first shaft of neighbourly goodwill awaiting him. Mrs. Corbett's compliments on a sheet of tinted scented paper, and would he kindly let her know how much she was indebted to him, as she should not in future require his professional services.

He concealed the sheet of perfumed venom from his wife, and turning from his untasted tea, went to look over his books, and make out the amount. It was not a very heavy pecuniary loss. The Corbetts were not of the class who make the fortunes of doctors. But it lost none of its moral and social force for that reason.

He was still sadly turning over his books, wondering who would be the next patient whose name he would have to erase from his list, when a ring at the door bell, followed by a little confusion, and a murmur of voices in the hall, made his heart beat for a moment almost to suffocation. He started up and opened the door, just in time to see the drawing-room door close. He crossed the hall, and hastily

entered the room, to find Kate Tollmache clasping his wife in her arms, while the rector stood silently by, with a pale sad face.

"Dear Mrs. Playfair!" Kate was saying, "you must not give way to despair. We may save her yet. Oh, if you knew some of the things I could tell you, you would not think this so dreadful. Tell me all, and let us consult what is best to be done."

"You are very kind, but I fear there is nothing to be done," said Doctor Playfair, sadly.

"That cannot be. Oh, tell me all. There must be some chance that might be tried."

Doctor Playfair told her all, showed her Rose's note, and described his fruitless journey of the previous day. "What more can I do, Miss Tollmache? A man with but a poor practice, and a large family, cannot afford to go tearing all about Europe on such a hopeless quest."

"Of course not. You have your duty to your other children to consider; but I have friends in all directions who might help us. Doctor Playfair," she continued, with a wonderful depth of sadness in her large brown eyes, which seemed to soften all her face, "I would not willingly say one word to pain you; but I know Victor Wycherley. He will not marry her. She is not the first girl he has enticed away from her home under a promise of marriage."

A sharp cry, almost a scream from Mrs. Playfair, who had sunk back on a sofa, interrupted her. "Oh, you are cruel!" she exclaimed. "You make out the worst! He could not be so infamous!"

"My poor dear, you must not think me cruel. I would only show you the urgent need of instant action. Doctor Playfair cannot go in search of them; you must leave that to me. Trust me, sooner or later, I will find them. You must only hold yourself prepared," she added, turning to him, "to start instantly, at any time when you are telegraphed for."

"We have no right to put all this upon you, Miss Tollmache."

"You do not put it. I take the right I possess in common with every created being to strive to the uttermost to rescue the innocent from the clutches of the guilty. I am sure Mr. Lawrence will tell you the same. He was good enough to escort me here," she added, colouring a little, very unnecessarily, for the Playfairs would have little heeded how or with whom she had come. "We have only just arrived, and I wanted to see at once what could be done. I have been so much abroad, and know so many people in all parts of Europe, I thought I might be of use. Do not think me abrupt if I go away at once. I should like to write at least a dozen letters to-night. Cheer up, dear Mrs. Playfair!" and she stooped and kissed her kindly; "our dear little Rose has taken a step which must affect her whole after life, but believe me, you will yet see her back safe again with you."

She was gone in another moment, but not the effect of her coming. Her hopeful words and energetic vigour of action had thrown the first ray of really solid comfort into the hearts of the suffering parents. She had inspired them with a gleam

of the hopefulness born within herself of her resolute determination to succeed.

"Kate, you are an angel," the rector said, as they walked rapidly along the deserted street. "If I might be allowed to use the expression—a muscular one!"

"Oh, Lionel, I cannot talk to you," she replied. "I am thinking against time. There is so little time to think what is best to be done, and every hour is of consequence. Please don't talk to me."

He faithfully obeyed; and when they reached the house she said—

"I think I see it all clearly now. But I shall have to write the best part of the night."

"Can you have your letters ready by three o'clock?" the rector asked, when they parted for the night.

"Yes, I think so. Why?"

"Then bring them down to the hall door at that hour. I will be there. By walking over with them to Willesbury I can post them in time for the early mail. That will save twelve hours, and keep Monksford in the dark."

"An excellent thought! I will have them ready."

As the clock struck three Kate stole gently downstairs with her packet, and softly opened the door. Lionel Lawrence was waiting outside.

"I hope you have not been waiting long," she said.

"I have never been away!"

"Oh, Lionel, what have you been doing?"

"Leaning against the beech tree yonder most of the time smoking cigars, and watching the light in

your window. I could see your shadow on the blind sometimes."

She clasped her arms round his neck, and buried her face on his shoulder for a moment without speaking. Then she merely said,

"You must be very tired?"

"I do not feel as if I could ever be tired again. But now, give me the letters, my wee pet, and go away to bed. You look pale."

He folded her in his arms again for a moment, and kissed her. Then taking the letters, he went quietly out, turning for one last lingering glance as she gently closed and fastened the door. With a look of wistful softness on her face, Kate stole quietly up to her room. And through the mild misty autumn darkness, Lionel Lawrence strode away towards Willesbury, nearly nine miles distant.

END OF VOL. II.

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